

CALCUTTA

The Living City

VOLUME II THE PRESENT AND FUTURE

Edited by
Sukanta Chaudhuri





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Volume II: The Present and Future

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Sukanta Chaudhuri



S.C.E.R.T. West Bengal.

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NOTES AND CONVENTIONS

Ascriptions :

All unsigned matter is editorial. This includes the unscribed short features and boxed items accompanying larger articles, whose authors are not responsible for these adjuncts.

The signed articles all conform to a common spirit of civic pride and involvement; but their particular views may be the authors' alone.

The Spelling of Bengali Names:

This book introduces a new system for uniform transliteration of Bengali names (except those of contributors, where personal preferences have been retained). This necessarily means departing from customary spellings and individual practices, but the gain in uniformity and authenticity may be thought to compensate.

Simplicity has been a major consideration. We have avoided diacritical marks, and retained some customary English shortenings: Mukherji or Ganguli, for instance, rather than Mukhopadhyay or Gangopadhyay. But in most cases, Bengali forms have been adopted (Thakur not Tagore, Basu not Bose), in Bengali rather than Sanskrit pronunciation. Sanskrit forms have, however, been retained in titles which are Sanskritic in origin and context (Vidyasagar, Vachaspati); where, moreover, the Sanskritic form might be so common that departure would cause confusion (Vivekananda, Vidyasagar). As a rule, Sanskrit compound letters have also been represented by their modified Bengali pronunciation; but the *ksh* compound has been retained in full in words like *Lakshmi*, which have an all-India circulation.

All-India currency has also suggested the use of *-bazar* rather than *-bazaar* as a place-name ending. Old British forms of a few names have been retained in the case of institutions of that period or ambience (Cossipore Club, Tollygunge Club).

Indian celebrities have usually been referred to by their first names as in common Indian practice. They have, however, been indexed under their surnames.

Following Indian practice, adjuncts to first names such as 'kumar', 'chandra' or 'nath' have been affixed to the first names.

As regards Bengali letters, অ and আ have both perforce been rendered by *a*; ঔ by *ou*. শ has been used for ঞ and ঞ and *s* for ঞ. The final *-a* often used in English transliteration of Indian names (*Rama*, *Ashoka*) has been omitted, as it is never sounded in Bengali.

Because of the system adopted, the names of some well-known organizations may be found to differ somewhat from the current forms (*Ramkrishna* not *Ramakrishna* Mission, *Bahurupee* not *Bohurupee*).

As this account indicates, the system is not without inconsistencies. Total consistency seems impossible without the use of special notation; even then, the result might seem unacceptable in terms of impression or impact. We have aimed rather at a reasonable and practicable compromise.

Citation of Dates:

Dates of birth and, where applicable, death have been cited wherever possible – often by editorial insertion – after the names of famous persons, to enhance the book's value as a work of reference. Such dates are often hard to find, especially in English-language publications. Though checked with every possible care, they may be inaccurate in a few cases, as nearly all of them have necessarily been taken from secondary sources. We hope this will not impair their general usefulness.

Figures, especially in statistics, have often been cited by the lakh (hundred thousand) rather than the million: thus 1,00,000 not 100,000; 10,00,000 not 1,000,000.

PREFACE

The debts expressed in the Acknowledgements to Volume I are equally real with respect to Volume II. Heartiest thanks, as before, to our contributors; to Mr Ramkrishna Datta for the maps and diagrams; to Ms Supriya Guha for help with the desk-editing; and to Ms Abhaya Dasgupta, Mr Sujoy Gupta, Mr Amlan Dasgupta and Dr Prabodh Biswas for their sustained moral support. Thanks once more to the staff of the National Library, the Presidency College Library, and the library of the Ramkrishna Mission Institute of Culture, as well as all the other libraries, museums and art collections to which we have turned for assistance.

With respect to this volume in particular, I must thank Mr Pearson Surita and Mr Bimal Dhar. Many institutions, official and unofficial, have helped us with facts, figures and photographs. Above all, we are grateful to the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, the Calcutta Improvement Trust and the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority for their generosity in supplying illustrations. Needless to say, the views expressed by the contributors to this volume are not necessarily those adopted by these or by any other official body.

Mr Priyaranjan Rakshit and Mr Debabrata Ray have given valuable help with the illustrations.

Articles on the economy, urban development and public works generally present the latest data publicly available in mid-1989. Contributors on social, cultural and artistic matters have sometimes chosen to end at a slightly earlier date.

The selection of material, as of names for inclusion, becomes more and more difficult as we approach our own times. No regrets on this score can be deeper than our own. We only hope we have found room for the most vital constituents of the living city.

Aukanta Chaudhuri



INTRODUCTION

Few modern cities have bred so many myths as Calcutta. By 'myths' I do not mean falsehoods, but myths in the social or anthropological sense: popular beliefs and images that acquire the status of basic truths and guide our interpretation of reality. The chief Calcutta myths are depressing ones, relating to poverty, over-population and urban blight. Almost as compelling, however, are the equivocal myth of political awareness and political turmoil, and the reassuring myth of Calcutta's cultural pre-eminence, her intense intellectual and artistic life. And with each year, these myths of contrary drift seem to balance one another in ever more precarious, more miraculous counterpoise.

Myths reveal; they also distort. The first point to appreciate is the myth-making power itself. The stuff such myths are made of can be found elsewhere, perhaps more abundantly. India's biggest slums are in Bombay, not Calcutta; her lowest metropolitan literacy rate is in Hyderabad; and the last cholera epidemic in a long time was in Delhi. But Calcutta evinces some extra dimension of self-awareness, some imaginative engagement with these problems, which makes her offer herself as a self-castigating symbol for the general afflictions of all Third-World cities.

Calcutta has had more than her fair share of special afflictions as well, but these she has borne with heroic and almost suicidal silence. She is the 'primate city', the great magnet for survival-seekers from one of the poorest and most populous segments of the subcontinent. More amazingly still, she has absorbed with incredibly meagre resources, little attention and less sympathy, what is arguably the biggest mass migration in the history of man. The tormented assimilation of the East Bengal refugees is the sole subject of an article in this book; but the issue crops up in nearly all writing on modern Calcutta. For a city that has lived through this trauma, it would have been enough to have survived. Calcutta has done more. She has built much and achieved much in the last four decades, however we assess that achievement. The effort could not have been sustained without an absorbed imaginative engagement with herself that creates works of art at one level and generates myths at another.

The danger with myths is that they tend to perpetuate themselves. India and the world have cast Calcutta indelibly as a volatile yet resigned, self-denying city, and Calcutta has concurred. She has never received from the nation even a fraction of the resources and the concern that are her due by virtue of her 'primate' role, and by having paid singly so much of the price of India's independence. Indeed, a plausible case has been made out to indicate deliberate deprivation in the past. This has bred resentment and political controversy, but not a proportionate anger. On the contrary, local efforts at civic pride have often been blunted against this acquiescing, adaptive image of the city. Too many of Calcutta's special cults and distinctions are negative in import, illustrating the city's genius for accepting the unendurable and condoning the deficient. Their rectification thereby seems less urgent, almost judged contrary to the spirit of the city.

Such acceptance of the city's 'working anarchy' has also obscured the substantial though inadequate development carried out over the last two decades. Its chief agency, the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority, has become the subject of one of Calcutta's latest sub-myths.

Behind the challenges of funding and execution lies a root problem of social psychology. The civic history of Calcutta since Independence is not by any means one of simple decline. On the contrary, the CMDA marks the first effort at mobilizing not only the physical development of the city – the Calcutta Improvement Trust had done that admirably fifty years earlier – but the citizen's involvement in the work. The material in our first volume indicated the sordid civic state of the old 'Black Town'. From the inception of the city, its social and cultural life has been wedded to its civic deficiencies. The spirit of planned development runs contrary to Calcutta's three-hundred-year-old ethos: both the executors and the beneficiaries of the process may find themselves divided at heart.

Our articles on urban development and public services will have achieved their purpose if they inform and involve the reader about the urgent civic restructuring the city demands: for Calcutta's standing promise of survival for all must change, as the demand of the masses changes, to ensure survival with dignity.

The hope for such change lies in the fact that this mass consciousness has itself grown in Calcutta. The seed was sown when the common man of Calcutta joined the freedom movement, simultaneously with the start of meaningful trade union activity. But it was the post-Independence upheaval that made Calcutta a fertile ground for Marxism, as the crystallization of a pervasive process of social change and struggle.

The ramifications of Calcutta's popular consciousness, and their reflection in political movements, need definition. They found their most dramatic expression in the extremist activity and endemic political violence of the 1960s and early 1970s. As is now amply clear, this was marginal to a more circumspect, broad-based redefinition of local society and government in a Marxian light. But these formal movements were possible only because Calcutta has traditionally been the poor man's city, the migrant's city. Even its professional and neo-political elite commonly attained their status through a course of struggle and migration, of plain living not entirely unmixed with high thinking. This can be matched everywhere in India, but has been curiously prominent in Calcutta's social structure. The Partition intensified the process, producing an unusual receptivity to a freer and more equal interchange between the classes.

It is this interchange again that has guided the course of the arts in Calcutta since Independence, transforming their basis in the old 'Renaissance' culture that first brought Western influences to bear on indigenous tradition. One must tread carefully here, for the image of Calcutta as India's 'cultural capital' is flatteringly seductive. The boast has yielded a sour crop of smugness and cheap self-praise; but the truth at its core is not to be dismissed. Calcutta not only generates intense artistic activity – other Indian cities might do as much – but it orients its community life uniquely towards the creation and contemplation of art, immersion in a milieu of art, even art fads and artists' wrangles. This immersion sometimes stimulates, sometimes dissipates productive mental activity. But taken all in all, it has produced a special sensibility that all Indians can recognize. And at its highest and best, it has created a corpus of art comparable with any in the modern world, though partly obscured by the restricted currency of the Bengali language.

Traditionally, Calcutta's dominant art has been literature. Literary triumphs are hard to achieve in the shadow of Rabindranath Thakur; and the generation immediately after him produced giants of its own. But the self-sustaining vibrancy of Calcutta's literary world ensures a stream of productive work, occupied in the last three decades with incorporating a broader spectrum of colloquial, contemporary idioms and experiences beyond the rarer, more intellectual modernity of the first phase after Rabindranath.

It is in the performing arts, however, that Calcutta has seen the profoundest change since Independence. In 1957, the poet Sudhindranath Datta wrote a remarkable article on Calcutta. Among the city's cultural deficiencies, he mentioned its cinema, which was 'seldom rewarding', and its theatre, which 'suffer [ed] recurrent depressions'. But already in 1954, Shambhu Mitra had staged *Raktakarabi*, while Satyajit Ray filmed *Pather Panchali* in 1955. A rebirth of the Bengali theatre and cinema was under way.

The story of that rebirth has been told in the relevant articles of this book. The point to note now is that here most memorably, a new involvement with the human and the contemporary provided the transforming force, though not always the immediate theme. The social upheavals of the 1940s and 1950s generated a humane, even sentimental concern, alongside (though not always linked to) the early movement of Bengal Marxism. Since then the wine has darkened: the presentation of life is today sharper, more unsparing, harder in its very poignancy. Calcutta's art, like her society and the city itself, is negotiating yet another cross-road on its endless path.

In Calcutta it always seems too sanguine to hope, too defeatist to despair. But the engagement with humanity persists, however its expression may vary. This provides a lasting affirmation as Calcutta lives, grows and changes. Our book attempts to present the living city.

•

THE GROWTH OF CALCUTTA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Satyesh C. Chakraborty

In this paper, I shall make no attempt at a full history of Calcutta's growth and expansion in the twentieth century. I shall take up only a few profile studies that are defensible by data or by commonly shared experience. The selection of profiles for study, however, depends to a great extent on what we consider as continuations of the past having a bearing on twentieth-century Calcutta. This in turn leads us back to the fundamental question of territory: what spatial unit shall we consider as Calcutta?

The boundaries of Calcutta have changed many times. This creates a problem in defining our unit of investigation. At the same time, the factors behind these changes in the territorial limits of Calcutta afford many interesting lights on the mainstream of the social forces that went to form the city.

The Limits of Calcutta

It is probably correct to say that the boundaries of Calcutta remained officially undefined till 6 February 1779, when Justice John Hyde of the Supreme Court laid down the municipal limits of the city in connection with the case of Krishnachandra Ghoshal and Gokulchandra Ghoshal vs. Henry Watson. Then on 11 September 1794 came a Proclamation by the Governor-General Lord Cornwallis, fixing the city boundaries in detail for municipal and judicial purposes.

The details of the demarcation have been

cited in the article on 'The Growth and Development of Old Calcutta' in Volume I. My concern is rather with the relevance of such decisions for twentieth-century Calcutta.

Justice Hyde's role in the matter identifies two major interest-groups or power-groups working to shape the social artifact called Calcutta. One was the municipal government, and the other the judicature functioning as a limb of the government of the Lower Provinces of Bengal. The former was seen as a subjunct institution. This relationship between the Municipal and the Provincial Governments still persists. The Provincial Government has demonstrated its superiority by repeated supersession of the municipal government of Calcutta during the last forty years.

At the time of Hyde's judgement, the Government of the Lower Provinces of Bengal also represented the Imperial Government in India. Lord Cornwallis's Proclamation marks the direct operation of this still higher institution. It influenced Calcutta's destiny down to the transfer of the capital to Delhi in 1912; it continues to influence it still. Here we see the continuation of the past as a force behind the social process of urbanization.

The nature of these institutions – the municipal government, the provincial government and the national government – have changed, needless to say. The changes are important, but they should be seen in their correct significance.

1.1 Lord Cornwallis



Basically, they indicate the trade-offs that these and other contending interest-groups obtained over the years. The last trade-off took place as late as 1981, when the Legislature in West Bengal, with the concurrence of the Government of India, passed the Calcutta Municipal Corporation Act.

I do not intend to discuss the changes obtained in the institutions of municipal governance. Instead let us look at the way the decision-makers in this regard responded to the geographical space where urbanization of the society in and around Calcutta was taking place. This is discernible from the changes made in the boundary of the city and the considerations behind each decision.

The city limits fixed by Justice Hyde in 1779 remained unaltered till 1847. The corroborative evidence in this regard is given in Section 3 of Act 24 of 1840, which defined the boundary of the city in line with Justice Hyde and, of course, Lord Cornwallis. But in Act 16 of 1847, Fort William (with the Esplanade or Maidan) and Coolie Bazar (later named Hastings) were excluded from Calcutta. The Fort was never returned to the city: it still remains in the hands of the military authorities. Coolie Bazar, which had grown as a shanty town for the labourers during the construction of the Fort, was brought back into the city by Act 5 of 1868. By then, Coolie Bazar had changed its social character, being inhabited by retired Europeans for the most part: it had grown sufficiently important for such reincorporation. (Hence too its change of name to 'Hastings'.)

Acts of exclusion from and inclusion into Calcutta's city limits were very much a feature of the twentieth century too. The tract known as Garden Reach was brought into Calcutta in 1931, but soon taken out of it again. Such mercuriality was not a sign of madness. It merely showed that the State Government was unable to cope with the spatial spread of urbanization in and around Calcutta by devising any adequate institutional mechanism. No resolution of this problem has yet been found, as the evidence given below indicates.

Unregulated use of urban land had been a common practice beyond the municipal limits of the city, where property tax was not levied at the same rates. The Provincial Government decided in 1876 to bring all the peripheral areas of Calcutta under the umbrella of a single Suburban Municipality, distinct from the city

municipality or Corporation of Calcutta. There was popular pressure for municipal services in the suburbs – but also a resistance to higher taxes on property. A trade-off was obtained by keeping property taxes lower than in Calcutta while providing inferior municipal services. The city and the suburban municipalities thus represented two types of institutions for urban governance, differentially endowed with power and responsibilities, and considered adequate between them to deal with the phenomenon of urban sprawl.

Within the next thirteen years, however, the interest-group games had destroyed such confidence. In 1889, the suburban area of Calcutta was split into five units to form (1) the North Suburban Municipality of Kashipur and Chitpur, (2) the East Suburban Municipality of Maniktala, (3) the Suburban Municipality of Garden Reach, (4) the South Suburban Municipality of the Tollyganj area, and (5) a residual part, which was merged with the city of Calcutta. This last part contained localities like Entali, Beniapukur, Baliganj, Bhabanipur and the northern part of Tollyganj. Here by that time lived some of the more articulate members of the city's power-groups: they demanded a better quality of municipal services, and could also afford to pay property taxes at higher rates.

The demand for changing the form of the municipal government of Calcutta had come from the Provincial Government as well as from the citizens many times since 1726. Not in all instances was the change obtained more democratic than the previous dispensation. Nevertheless, the persistence of pressure-group tactics and their periodic intensity can be deduced if we simply note the years in which changes were made in the form of the municipal government in Calcutta. The years are 1726, 1753, 1793, 1803, 1833, 1840, 1847, 1848, 1850, 1852, 1854, 1856, 1863, 1865, 1866, 1867, 1870, 1871, 1872, 1874, 1876, 1881, 1888, 1899, 1923, 1926, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1939, 1951 and 1981 – thirty-five times in 256 years. I have excluded the years when the city government was totally superseded by the provincial government. None of these actions, however, could control the process of urbanization in and around Calcutta.

After 1889, the boundary of Calcutta was again changed in 1931 when the North Suburban Municipality of Kashipur-Chitpur, the East Suburban Municipality of Maniktala and



the Suburban Municipality of Garden Reach were merged with the city of Calcutta. But Garden Reach, as I mentioned earlier, was excluded soon after. In 1951, the southern part of Tollyganj was added to Calcutta. In 1984, the Municipality of Garden Reach, the South Suburban Municipality of the Behala region, and many non-municipal areas were added to the jurisdiction of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, bringing the total area under the Corporation to 187.33 square kilometres from the earlier 104 sq. km.

In the 1971 Census, the data from earlier Census years was retabulated in terms of the different territories under different types of municipal government. Although we do not have similar sets of data for the non-municipal areas, the available figures afford some idea about the way urban spread has been taking place in and around the city of Calcutta. This can be seen from Table 1. It is apparent that the sprawl outward from the core city did not extend in all directions with equal intensity. We can also see that the decadal rate of population growth in the peripheral areas had overtaken that of the core city from the beginning of the twentieth century.

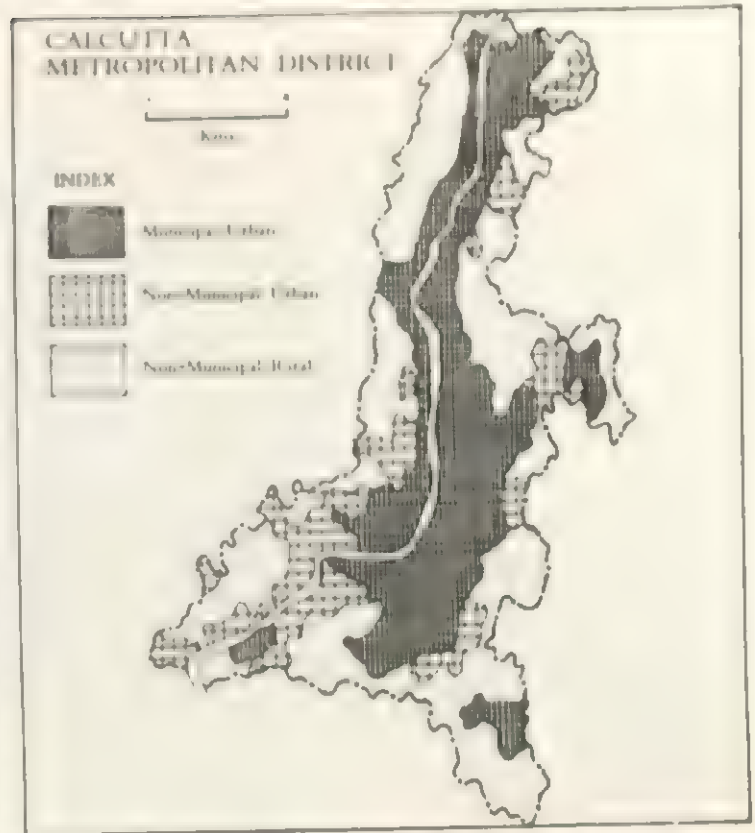


TABLE 1 Comparative Growth of Population in the City of Calcutta and Six Municipal Towns, 1901-81

Urban Places	Census Years								
	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981
Calcutta	(a) 234	1016	1053	1168	2167	2698	2927	3149	3408
	(b) 100	109	113	125	232	289	313	337	354
Haora	(a) 176	201	219	255	430	497	634	738	744
	(b) 100	114	124	145	244	282	360	419	422
South Suburban	(a) 26	32	33	39	63	104	186	273	378
	(b) 100	123	127	150	242	400	715	1050	1454
Garden Reach	(a) 28	45	46	56	85	109	131	155	191
	(b) 100	161	164	200	304	389	468	554	682
Baramagar	(a) 25	26	32	37	54	71	108	137	180
	(b) 100	104	128	148	216	308	432	548	680
South Dumdum	(a) 11	13	14	18	26	61	111	174	230
	(b) 100	118	127	164	236	555	1009	1582	2091
North Dumdum	(a) 10	9	8	5	6	12	38	64	96
	(b) 100	90	80	50	60	120	380	640	960

Notes: (a) Absolute population in thousands, adjusted for boundaries
(b) Index Number of (a) with 1901 as base of 100

1.2 Calcutta Metropolitan District - tracture division



1.3. Rush hour at
Shealdah Station

Migration : Crowding and Spreading

The social forces which contributed noticeably towards the growth of Calcutta and its immediate neighbourhood, were in fact urbanizing a much larger territory. This process pre-dates the formation of Calcutta itself. A number of townships based on trade and industry had been developing from the sixteenth century along the tidal-regime of the Hugli River, north of the site of Calcutta. Bandel, Hugli, Chunchura, Chandannagar, Shrirampur, Baranagar, Bantra, Uluberia and Bajbaj originated in the same way as Calcutta did. None of these withered away as Calcutta assumed supremacy. The river acted as a common corridor of transport, unifying all these urban nodes by a nexus of shared activity. This process of unification was strengthened when railroads emerged as the major means of transport from the middle of the nineteenth century. The railway tracks followed the two banks of the river with terminals at Calcutta (Shealdah) and Haora. Subsequently, the alignments of the major truck routes further reinforced this corridor. The earlier nodes grew stronger and started

assisting urban sprawls. Industries also rose to strengthen the process.

Calcutta did not draw people from the surrounding rural areas simply by offering a better quality of life. As in any other Indian city, the immigrants found in Calcutta poverty as severe and dehumanizing as in the villages. Indeed, kinship affiliations in the villages perhaps softened the harshness of poverty. The advantage that the cities offered instead was a relatively quick opportunity of new income through placement in the urban economy as handyman or casual worker in the transport, trade, manufacturing, conservancy or domestic sector. The quantum of such entries was naturally higher in the bigger cities like Calcutta. However, admission into such jobs was chiefly restricted to newcomers bearing good references from those already in employment. In issuing such references, kinship, caste, and regional, local, religious or linguistic affiliations operated in a highly discriminatory fashion. Hence different institutions and occupations, in Calcutta as elsewhere, have come to admit immigrants from specific regions and backgrounds in a highly preferential fashion. The

much-acclaimed pan-Indian character of Calcutta's population rides upon such discriminatory or preferential systems of absorption. The growth of population from such a process has been steady, though modest, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Calcutta has also experienced phenomenal arrivals of immigrants, induced by periodic upsets in the rural economy. Famines following failure of the monsoon have been the most frequent cause. To the afflicted people, the larger cities, especially 'capital-cities' like Calcutta, have appeared as better places for shelter than the smaller towns in their immediate neighbourhood: state-supported relief operations tend to be organized earlier and better in the capital-cities. Some of those who came returned home when times improved there. Others remained and found placements in the urban economy through sheer endurance, thereby contributing to the growth of the chosen city.

On 15 August 1947, the polity in some regions of British India was cast into a new turmoil, unprecedented in form and severity, from which there was no return to normalcy. The two nation-states of India and Pakistan came into being by the partition of former British India, through an award worked out on communal considerations. The minority communities of both these states crossed the borders in search of political security – or so they believed. Hundreds of thousands of people, often in clusters of a number of families, left their homes and hearths with no expectation of return. They came to be known as 'displaced persons' or 'refugees'.

The metropolitan cities of Calcutta and Delhi were flooded by displaced persons from East and West Pakistan respectively. Both were 'capital-cities', and hence perceived as holding out promises of relief and help. But the Government, at both Delhi and Calcutta, was decidedly unprepared. Nor were the municipal governments of these two cities equal to the task. The refugees came in waves and sought out shelters according to their means and opportunities. The rich bought properties at offered prices. Those who could not afford such prices simply encroached on vacant land and built houses of sorts on their own. The still humbler strata set up squatter colonies on public land. The poorest of the poor flocked into relief camps till these overflowed. The



Above :
1.4 Harrison Road,
1893



Below :
1.5 The cityscape
today

event was full of trauma for both the immigrants and the residents.

The demand for urban services rose beyond the capacity of these two cities. The resident population, threatened with loss of their privileges and conveniences, felt aggrieved and estranged from these political immigrants. Yet

no riot broke out. Instead, demands arose for state intervention to ensure comprehensive metropolitan development, as the only way of meeting the crisis. The Union Government at Delhi, with better resources at its command, handled the task of rehabilitation faster and more comprehensively than the provincial government could accomplish in Calcutta. Left largely to themselves, the refugees in and around Calcutta slowly secured their placements in the urban economy and imparted new attributes to the process of urbanization. Urban planners and other scholars and specialists proved slow in comprehending these attributes. Poets, writers and men of the theatre and cinema showed themselves more sensitive in this respect.

In 1951, the Superintendent of Census Operations in West Bengal first recognized a continuous industrial region stretching from Bansheria to Uluberia on the right bank of the river and from Kalyani to Bajbaj on the left. In the 1961 Census, this tract was termed the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration (CUA). One can designate Calcutta as the core city for this agglomeration of towns.

The crowding of population in and around a core city is not something peculiar to Calcutta. It has been a very common feature of the spatial orientation of urbanization, in India as in many other countries. The Census of 1971 identified 339 urban agglomerations in India, all of them formed of several nodal towns in close proximity to a large core city. Each nodal town has some special service to offer, while depending on the core city for the other services. Like the core city, the other nodes all stimulate urban sprawl, which may together produce a conurbation – that is, the formation of a continuous stretch of built-up area. It is difficult to understand the character of the core without reference to what is happening elsewhere in the urban agglomeration.

In 1960, in response to the West Bengal Government's concern for regulated urbanization in and around Calcutta, the WHO produced an assignment report on modernization plans for the water-supply and sewage-disposal systems of the Calcutta region. In the process, the CUA was identified as having produced a conurbation as explained above. The WHO report related to this built-up area alone.

But the Government did not consider it judicious to confine its regulatory and develop-

mental role to this area alone. In a developing economy, urbanization of a society can commence before the built-up area manifests itself, since the construction of buildings follows investment secured from sizeable savings. Hence the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization (CMPO) identified in 1964 a much larger area than the conurbation, within which the individual settlements were found to have acquired urban characteristics through interaction with the neighbouring nodal towns and the core city. This area, named the Calcutta Metropolitan District (CMD), was adopted with minor modifications as the area of jurisdiction for the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) set up in 1971. In the same year, the Indian Census Organization accepted the CMD as representing the Standard Urban Area (SUA) of the metropolis of Calcutta. It was recognized that the social forces of urbanization were operating over a much larger area than the territorial jurisdiction of the municipal government of the city of Calcutta.

In Table 2 the CMD has been classified into three types of tracts: (1) the core city of Calcutta, (2) the municipal towns immediately surrounding this core city, and (3) the rest of the CMD. Adjusted population figures for all the Census years from 1901 to 1981 have been shown against each type. The rise in population within each type of tract is indicated, as also the share of each type in the total population of the CMD.

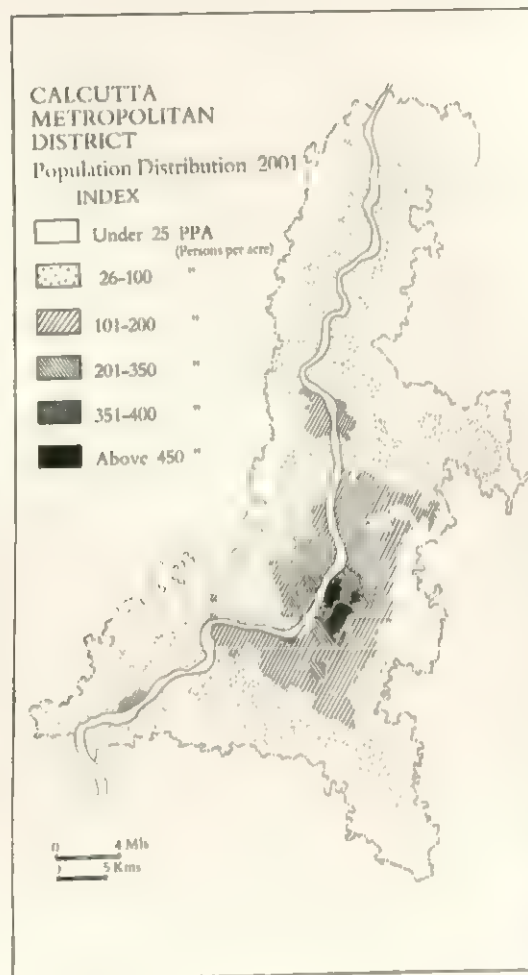
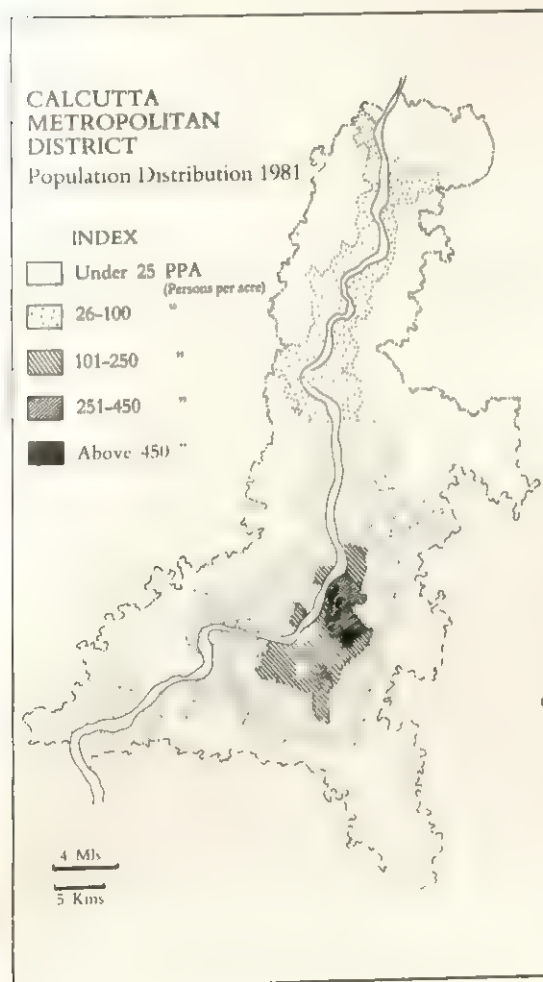
Several conclusions may be drawn from Table 2. Firstly, the core city of Calcutta has clearly the largest concentration of population within the CMD. But secondly, the rate of population growth within this core city has been consistently less than in the other two tracts. Also, this rate has been slower in the municipal towns adjacent to the core city than in the more distant areas. The pattern suggests that successive flows of population came to the core city and, having failed to secure placement within it, spread out.

In other words, the growth of population in the CMD has been influenced by two processes simultaneously: one of crowding and the other of spread or dispersal. While the crowding effect has reached a stage of finality within the core city, it is still intensifying in the more distant tracts. This is corroborated by the fact that the share of Calcutta in the total population of the CMD has been consistently declining

TABLE 2 Relative Placement of Tracts in the Growth of Population in the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration, 1901-81

Tracts		1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981
Calcutta City	(a)	934	1016	1053	1165	2167	2698	2927	3149	3305
	(b)	100	109	113	125	232	289	313	337	354
	(c)	61.9	58.2	55.9	54.5	59.8	57.8	48.9	42.4	35.9
Surrounding Municipal Towns listed in Table 1	(a)	276	326	352	410	664	860	1208	1541	1809
	(b)	100	118	128	149	241	312	438	558	655
	(c)	18.3	18.7	18.7	19.2	18.3	18.4	20.2	20.8	19.7
Rest of the CUA	(a)	300	403	480	564	790	1112	1849	2730	4080
	(b)	100	134	160	188	263	371	616	910	1360
	(c)	19.9	23.1	25.5	26.4	21.8	23.8	30.9	36.8	44.4
CUA as a whole	(a)	1510	1745	1885	2139	3621	4670	5984	7420	9194
	(b)	100	116	125	142	243	309	396	491	609
	(c)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Notes : (a) Absolute population in thousands adjusted for boundaries
 (b) Index Number of (a) with 1901 as base of 100
 (c) Share of the tract in the population of the CUA in ratio per centum



Left :
1.6 Population
distribution :
CMD, 1981

Right :
1.7 Projected
population
distribution :
CMD, 2001

TABLE 3 Population in Metropolitan Cities, 1901-81 (in millions)

Name of the city*	Census Years								
	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981
Calcutta	1.51	1.75	1.89	2.14	3.62	4.67	5.98	7.42	9.19
Bombay	0.81	1.02	1.25	1.27	1.69	2.97	4.15	5.97	8.23
Madras	0.59	0.60	0.63	0.78	0.93	1.54	1.95	3.17	4.28
Delhi	0.21	0.24	0.30	0.45	0.70	1.43	2.36	3.65	5.71
Hyderabad	0.45	0.50	0.41	0.47	0.74	1.13	1.25	1.80	2.83
Ahmedabad	0.19	0.22	0.27	0.31	0.60	0.88	1.21	1.74	2.82
Bangalore	0.16	0.19	0.24	0.31	0.41	0.78	1.20	1.65	2.91
Kanpur	0.20	0.18	0.22	0.24	0.49	0.71	0.97	1.28	1.69
Pune	0.16	0.17	0.20	0.25	0.32	0.61	0.79	1.14	1.69
Nagpur	0.17	0.12	0.17	0.24	0.33	0.49	0.69	0.93	1.30
Lucknow	0.26	0.25	0.24	0.28	0.39	0.50	0.66	0.81	1.01
Jaipur	0.16	0.14	0.12	0.15	0.18	0.30	0.41	0.64	1.01
Percentage share of Metropolitan Cities in total urban population of India	5.81	10.70	11.18	10.23	12.08	18.92	23.01	25.63	26.91 †

Notes : * Cities have been ranked according to the year of acquiring metropolitan status and the total size of population at that time.

† Owing to incomplete Census operations, the total population of Assam and Jammu & Kashmir have been excluded.

throughout this period. In 1971 for the first time, the area excluding Calcutta came to have a larger share of the population of the CMD than the core city itself. In short, the CMD is an example of an extended metropolis.

Calcutta is far from unique in having an extended metropolitan area. In fact, all metropolitan urban entities are constituted of extended metropolitan areas. Among the Indian metropolitan cities, however, Calcutta was the first to attain such a status, assigned by the Indian Census Organization to a city or an urban agglomeration with a population of one million or more. The CMD reached this size in 1881. But we are not sure whether a conurbation had formed at that time.

In 1981, the Indian Census Organization listed twelve urban agglomerations of a million or more people. The sequence of growth can be seen in Table 3, which further reveals some basic features of Indian urbanization. In the first instance, we may note that a city that once attains metropolitan status never loses it. The bottom row of the table also shows that metropolitan dominance is increasing in the Indian urban scene. In our specific context, we note that throughout the period under consideration, Calcutta retained its premier

position amongst the metropolitan cities of India. This runs counter to the popular belief, shared by its own citizens, that the shifting of the imperial capital to Delhi in 1912 constrained the development of Calcutta. One may surmise that this belief was stimulated by the pressure groups in Calcutta, having lost the opportunity to manipulate the apex political institution of India to serve the interest-group games within the city. Such games were growing more and more energetic at lower levels of government. This was the period when the municipal government of the city was admitting increasingly wider franchise.

In Table 4, an attempt has been made to measure the intensities of crowding and spread effects in and around the six leading metropolitan cities of India as of 1981. The order of crowding is not the same in all the centres. Calcutta leads, followed in descending order by Bombay, Madras, Hyderabad, Delhi and Bangalore. In terms of spread effects, the sequence is Bombay, Calcutta, Hyderabad, Delhi, Madras and Bangalore. In short, the interplay of crowding and spread effect varies regionally. We may incidentally note that none of these metro-cities can be described as primate in a pan-Indian context. This is shown



TABLE 4 Measures of Crowding & Spread Effects in Some Metropolitan Cities.

Metro-City	Population: 1981 (in millions)		Order of Crowding	Annual Growth Rate of Population (1971-81) in %		Order of Spread Effect
	Metro-City	Towns of Hinterland (within 100 km. radial distance)		Metro-City	Towns of Hinterland	
Calcutta	9.19	1.38	6.66	2.69	3.04	1.13
Bombay	8.23	1.27	6.52	3.26	5.09	1.56
Delhi	5.71	2.07	2.76	4.59	5.83	1.27
Madras	4.28	0.97	4.41	3.04	2.93	0.96
Bangalore	2.91	1.13	2.58	5.82	3.40	0.58
Hyderabad	2.53	0.64	3.95	3.42	5.08	1.49

Notes :	Index of Crowding	=	Population of Metro-City
		=	Population of Towns of Hinterland
	Index of Spread Effect	=	Annual rate of population growth of Towns in Hinterland
		=	Annual rate of population growth of Metro-City

by the fact that the population of the largest metropolis is only 1.11 times that of the next one.

I have earlier mentioned that extended metropolitan areas are found in many countries of the world. This does not mean that the attributes of such tracts are the same everywhere. There are many factors of material culture which impart country-specific features to their extended metropolitan areas. The largest extended metropolitan area in the USA runs from Boston, Massachusetts to Richmond, Virginia along the Atlantic Coast. This is popularly known as the Megalopolis of the USA. The CMD is the largest urban agglomeration in India. We may compare their features to highlight how the Indian case differs from that of the USA.

The term 'megalopolis' does not simply designate a very large urbanized area. It refers to a territory composed of a number of large cities acting as nodes, but interlinked into a unified entity through the transport network. On a much smaller scale than in the US example, the CMD is also composed of several urban nodes interlinked through the transport network. There ends the similarity between the two regions.

In the USA the interstitial areas between the urban nodes, as also the peripheral areas, are marked by very low density of population. One may even say that these are empty areas and generally open. Hardly any agricultural activity goes on here, and the metropolis gets supplies of agricultural commodities through a nation-wide transport network. In the CMD, on the contrary, the interstitial tracts as also the peripheral areas are densely peopled, supporting intensive agriculture and supplying the metropolis with diverse agricultural products including rice and vegetables. The difference cannot be explained by the different levels of economic development in the USA and India. The extended metropolitan areas in Japan are similar to that around Calcutta; the pattern has also been reported from other Asian countries like South Korea, Taiwan and Indonesia. For want of a better term, we may categorize this as an Asian type of extended metropolitan area. It has been little studied as yet, and its origins are yet to be traced conclusively.

In the light of what has been stated above, let us take a second look at the demographic orientation of the Calcutta Metropolitan District. We can reclassify the CMD according



TABLE 5 Inter-tractal Differences within the Calcutta Metropolitan District, 1971

Tracts by Land-use Types	Area as % of Total	Population as % of Total	Density of Population per Sq Km
Urbanized Municipal	32.47	81.21	14,333
Urbanized Non-municipal	16.45	10.47	3,739
Rural Non-municipal	51.08	10.32	1,187
Calcutta Metropolitan District	100.00	100.00	8,999

to the quality of urban services available, into (1) a tract served by one or other form of municipality, predominantly built-up; (2) a second tract, also largely built-up but having no municipal services; and (3) the remaining area, with no municipal services and where the land-use is predominantly rural. The relative placements of these three components of the CMD in terms of area and population are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 suggests a few interesting characteristics of the CMD. We find that about half the area supports agricultural land use. Going by occupations, however, this very tract appears preponderantly urban. Needless to say, in the tract where land use is decidedly urban, the population is also engaged in urban occupations. The major part of the population of the CMD lives here in an extremely crowded state, perhaps to benefit by the urban services they get.

Amongst these three, the rural non-municipal tract obviously constitutes the most distinctive feature of the CMD. The people living in this tract interact with the urban area

in many different ways. Among them are producers of agricultural commodities intended for sale in the urbanized area. There are traders of all kinds to facilitate such sales; they also bring into the rural tract various goods produced in the urbanized area. But a larger variety of industries, mostly belonging to the informal sector, are located within this tract itself. Procurement of raw materials and sale of manufactured goods support other types of interaction with the urbanized area. Then there are the ubiquitous commuters, who reside within the rural tract but work in the urbanized area. All these make the rural tract functionally an integral component of the urbanized area.

If there exists a basis for interaction, there will be a demand for transport. Bus routes from the urbanized areas are getting increasingly extended into this rural tract and beyond. More important has been the contribution of privately-owned fuel-efficient light-weight carriers, like scooters, motorized cycles and three-wheeler trucks, in facilitating unification of the two types of economic spaces. One may reasonably postulate that this unified space has

TABLE 6 Relative Incidence of Earners by Occupation Groups, 1959

Occupation Groups	Ratio Percentum	
	Calcutta	Urbanized CMD
Professional, technical and related	8.7	7.3
Agriculture-related: owners, tenants, managers & officials	0.2	0.2
Non-agricultural owners, managers & officials	4.8	3.5
Clerical and related	16.3	13.4
Sales workers	17.4	14.7
Manual handicraftsmen	13.2	12.7
Mechanized operatives	2.4	2.1
Services	17.6	13.7
Labour	19.1	32.2
Unclassified	0.3	0.2
Total	100.0	100.0



TABLE 7 Relative Incidence of Migrants in the Calcutta Metropolitan District, 1881-1971
(in ratio percentum of total population)

<i>Census Year</i>	<i>Relative Incidence</i>	<i>Census Year</i>	<i>Relative Incidence</i>
1881	59.74	1931	56.80
1891	60.20	1941	62.20
1901	54.75	1951	66.79
1911	58.33	1961	52.07
1921	52.88	1971	33.74

now extended the boundary of the CMD as delimited twenty-five years ago. We are seeing the social transformation of indigenous rural communities into highly interacting urbanized groups.

By contrast, the urbanized area of the CMD has emerged primarily through immigration. Its dwellers came here for employment. Many of them found jobs in organizations and institutions belonging to the formal sector. Others remained more free-floating, offering diverse services as unskilled labour in transport, domestic work, small trading establishments, and small manufactories belonging to the informal sector. The placement of the work force within the city of Calcutta as also in the urbanized area of the CMD is suggested by the 1959 figures shown in Table 6.

Table 6 does not require any explanation. I shall only point out that the occupation groups embrace organizations belonging to both the formal and the informal sectors. This is only to remind ourselves that the co-existence of these two forms of economic institutions is a general feature of the CMD. Our only problem is to explain this co-existence, because the availability of transport does not provide a sufficient condition for it.

The Working Population : Formal and Informal Sectors

I said earlier that the so-called Asian type of extended metropolitan area has not been studied in detail. I shall now claim that no explanation of its formation can be found unless one considers the co-existence of the formal and informal sectors in the urban economy. Scholars who have taken this approach postulate a number of factors, which reveal a great deal about the basic nature of the city of Calcutta. I shall examine these variables one by one. If I fail to explain conclusively the co-existence of the

formal and informal sectors, it will at least help us to understand Calcutta a little better.

In the first instance, we need to recognize that Calcutta grew through immigration. The magnitude of immigration into the CMD can be gauged from Table 7, which cites the relative incidence of migrants in the total population of the CMD for all Census years from 1881 to 1971. A migrant is classified as non-migrant after residence over two successive surveys, one being held every tenth year.

Migrants outnumbered the indigenous population almost throughout this period, except in 1971. We shall explain this deviation of 1971 later. (The data in this and subsequent tables can be supplemented from the article on 'The Demography of Calcutta'.)

People come to a large city to work. Only after securing employment can one bring over one's dependants to share one's life. Even then one has to get as many family members as possible to engage in gainful work. This phenomenon is clearly reflected in Table 8. We should note the relative placements of the non-immigrants and the immigrants in this regard.

The residents were absorbed in diverse types of economic activities. The city has been generally non-discriminatory in this regard between immigrants and non-immigrants, which is a decisive attribute of a truly urban culture. This should not, however, imply that the people of different regional groups are equally engaged in all types of occupations. As said before, there is a pronounced relationship between the migrants' places of origin and their absorption in specific sub-sectors of the economy. The pattern of distribution of the city's work force between the various sectors of the economy and between migrants and non-migrants as of 1971 is presented in the Table on p55.



TABLE 8 Participation Rates in Work of Non-immigrants and Immigrants by Sex and Age in the City of Calcutta, 1961 (in ratio percentum)

Age Group	Male		Female	
	Non-immigrants	Immigrants	Non-immigrants	Immigrants
0-14	-	4.2	-	0.4
15-34	67.0	80.6	4.8	9.3
35-59	99.0	89.9	12.2	17.1
60 +	47.7	54.6	5.8	5.8

TABLE 9 Relative Incidence of Bengali Earners by Occupation Group in Calcutta City and Calcutta Industrial Region, 1959

Occupation Groups	as percentage of all earners in the given group	
	City of Calcutta	Calcutta Industrial Region
Professional, technical & related	80.0	81.0
Agriculture-related: owners, tenants, managers & officials	69.5	79.9
Non-agricultural owners, managers, & officials	61.3	64.2
Clerical & related	75.4	78.4
Sales workers	59.6	50.7
Manual handicraftsmen	60.5	56.1
Mechanized operatives	36.6	38.7
Services	39.8	39.6
Labour	31.7	27.2
Unclassified	81.1	87.2
Total	53.4	48.7

TABLE 10 Territorial Origin of Workers in West Bengal by Selected Sectors, 1986 (ratio percentum)

Sector	Territory of Origin	
	West Bengal	Other States of India
Jute	26.49	73.51
Engineering	64.05	35.95
Printing press	80.30	19.70
Glass	38.96	61.04
Iron and steel (1983 figures)	49.04	50.96
Chemical industry	62.96	37.04
All Industries combined	47.14	52.86

TABLE 11 Average Labour Productivity in Formal Sector Industry: 1951-53 and 1964-66 (Rupees per worker)

Indicator	India		Maharashtra		West Bengal	
	1951-53	1964-66	1951-53	1964-66	1951-53	1964-66
Gross value of products	2,453	5,373	2,607	6,849	2,163	5,213
Net value added	676	1,394	776	1,878	610	1,347



Since immigrants come from almost every Indian state, it would be interesting to see if the people from the immediate hinterland of Calcutta are absorbed in the different sectors of the economy in any distinctive manner. This is partly revealed in Table 9; though this presents 1959 data, the situation has not changed radically since then. We find that the Bengalis are relatively less represented in the factory (mechanized operative) and services sectors, as also in the category of free-floating labour. In all three sectors, they constitute less than 40 per cent of the work-force; and because of the numbers involved in these sectors, they prove to make up little over half the total work-force in the city of Calcutta, and under half in the Calcutta industrial region as a whole.

However, the Bengali participation in the work force, as shown in the bottom row of Table 9, should be related to the formation of urbanized society in rural surroundings within the CMD, as I explained earlier. The people of this rural tract obtain their earnings from the city, but their residences are in the villages within the extended metropolitan area. In the Census records, they will not be enumerated as belonging to either the city of Calcutta or the Calcutta industrial region. The total day-time work force of the city and the industrial region is therefore not reflected in Table 9. However, there are other sources of information about the workers living in this rural tract but employed in the urbanized tracts.

It is easier to get data on the territorial origins of the workers in West Bengal as a whole than in the Calcutta Metropolitan District alone. However, we may use this data about West Bengal on the consideration that the CMD accounts for most of the urbanizing institutions of the state. Table 10 shows the territorial origins of workers in West Bengal as of 1986 in some dominant sectors.

If we refer to our earlier observation on the relative incidence of immigrants during the different Census years (Table 7), we can easily guess that the labour market for the formal sector was rather large. In 1969, 4,99,000 workers were engaged in the jute manufactories and engineering factories, which together accounted for 63.1 per cent of the total work force engaged in the registered factories of West Bengal. The high incidence of migration had kept the wage rate depressed and stimulated adoption of labour-intensive production pro-



cesses in preference to capital-intensive technology in the formal-sector industries of West Bengal. The institutional arrangements used by the formal sector for working out such preferences are not simple. But their net effects on the economy of West Bengal or for that matter of India, have been telling indeed.

Taking the average of the three years 1964, 1965 and 1966, the gross value of output per worker in the formal-sector manufactories of India was Rs 5,373 per year. The net value added per worker was Rs 1,394. For West Bengal, the corresponding figures were Rs 5,213 and Rs 1,347 respectively. By contrast, in Maharashtra, which adopted more advanced technology, the corresponding figures were Rs 6,849 and Rs 1,878 respectively. That the placement of West Bengal was consistent over a longer period can be verified from Table 11. The formal sector in West Bengal had low labour productivity between 1951 and 1953 as well.

The increase in all the values between 1951-53 and 1964-66 can be partly explained by inflation, since the computations were made in current prices. But the major part of this increase has been due to intersectoral shifts in the manufacturing economy. In West Bengal, the overall trend between 1951 and 1966 has been for consistent decline in employment in jute industries with a corresponding increase in the engineering sector. This engineering sector was turning out goods of higher value for consumers in the transport, household and industrial units. Not all its products, however, can be termed investment goods. A considerable part of it consisted of final goods like household appliances. More importantly

1.8 Migrant labour : porters and handcart-pullers

almost all goods produced in the engineering industries were made by assembling many components. This provides an important reason for the co-existence of formal and informal sectors in the CMD.

It is common knowledge that by and large, the non-factory type manufacturing units belonging to the informal sector turn out the components for assembly in the formal-sector engineering establishments. In other words, the informal sector acts as ancillary to the formal sector. With some other products, the formal sector acts as ancillary to the informal sector. Classic examples of the latter are the production of yarn by the formal sector to be processed by weavers in the informal sector, and of plastic granules and resins by the petro-chemical industry for the informal sector to mould into final goods.

Ancillarization explains the co-existence of sectors. It also points to the problem to be faced when change of technology becomes imperative. The two partners in the game, the units in the formal and informal sectors acting as ancillaries, must simultaneously agree to changes in the technology of production when the need arises. But the two are not placed on the same footing in the matter of mobilizing the necessary funds. This may possibly explain why the manufacturing sector in West Bengal has been passing through a phase of recession since the mid-1960s.

The decline of manufacturing is reflected in the decline in relative incidence of the migrant population in 1971 (Table 7). It has also meant the relative ascendancy of trade and commerce, as opposed to manufacturing activities, in the CMD. In the late twentieth century, Calcutta has once again become a major commercial city of India.

To complete the story, I should point out that the formal-sector industries of India cover only a portion of the market. They produce better-quality goods for the richer buyers. The unattended needs of the poorer buyers are, therefore, met by the informal-sector units. This possibly explains why employment in the household or informal-sector industries has been increasing at a much higher rate than in the formal-sector units within the CMD in the last twenty years or so.

My story must end here. I was in search of the social forces of urbanization that make up the city of Calcutta. The process has proved to

operate over a much larger area than the city itself; also, it predates the city. The founders of the city failed to recognize that they were one group amongst a multitude of other actors. Their successors wished to ignore the importance of the process, by projecting the formal establishment of British Calcutta in 1690 as fundamental. It is more fitly viewed as one episode within a longer series of events. This denial repeatedly proved the inability of the city's governors to comprehend and deal with the process. Even when the larger social artifact made its presence felt some hundred years ago, the authorities' refusal to face their own failure of understanding caused pain to the other actors. It is time that we recognize the injustice inflicted upon the total social fabric of Calcutta as we prepare ourselves to celebrate the three-hundredth anniversary of Job Charnock's city.

In the early eighteenth century, the 'natives' of Calcutta had to pay for the construction of the Maratha Ditch to protect the interests of Fort William. In the early nineteenth century, the Lottery Committee spent its income to improve the quarters of the alien rulers, denying investment to benefit the 'natives'. In the twentieth century, the Calcutta Improvement Trust was created in a more egalitarian fashion, and did commendable service in improving the city for the 'natives' as well – but by expelling the poorer among them.

Today the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority has been set up to control the planning and development of the entire Metropolitan District. But this institution functions in an arena where social interest-groups work out their contentions as before. A major part of the citizens are still victims of civic deprivation.

The CMD is largely without municipal services. The tract where municipalities exist is segmented between many authorities. The largest segment, under the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, thus retains its advantage over the others. As an expression of our continuing unconcern, a part has been made to appear greater than the whole. Should we rectify the balance in 1990 while celebrating the anniversary of this part?

Tables 6, 9, 10 and 11 have been taken from Harold Lubell, *Calcutta: Its Urban Development and Employment Prospects* (ILO, 1974). The other tables have been compiled from Census reports and other official records.





THE POLITICS OF AGITATION: CALCUTTA 1912-1947



Suranjan Das

Once Bengal became the stamping ground of English colonialism in the subcontinent, Calcutta and its hinterland rapidly emerged as the main nucleus of British economic interests in the country. The prominent position that the city came to enjoy under the Raj was demonstrated by the concentration of industries there, the level of shipping which passed through its port and the vast hinterland given over to the production of tea, coal and jute, nurtured in funds and in spirit from Calcutta itself. The city also developed as the melting pot of Eastern and Western culture. When the Raj sought to impart Western education, Calcutta was the experimental site: the new Western-educated middle class rapidly made Calcutta the cultural capital of the subcontinent.

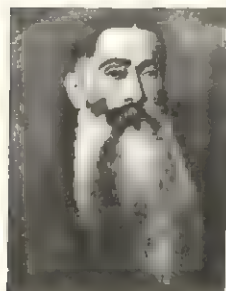
Yet this prized city of the Empire was to become a crucible of agitational politics that greatly contributed to the ending of the Empire. From the 1860s, Calcutta became a focal point of what has been called the 'politics of association', culminating in the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885. When Lord Curzon announced his infamous partition of Bengal in 1905, Calcutta responded enthusiastically to the anti-Partition agitation which gained in 1911 the limited success of rejoining the fractured Bengali-speaking community. But 1912 again altered the balance of Bengali morale. The transfer of the capital from

Calcutta to Delhi indicated the British determination to evade future challenges to its authority. Although essentially a '*bhadralok* movement', the anti-Partition Swadeshi agitation witnessed the first attempts at labour mobilization on a significant scale. On the other hand, the defeat of the Partition scheme came as a rude shock to the Muslim elite, which had its first taste of political power with the formation of East Bengal and Assam as a separate province. This resentment was the fountainhead of Muslim separatist politics in Bengal. Agitational politics in Calcutta from 1912 till 1947 reflected all these trends: mainstream nationalism, the militancy of subordinate social groups, and communal animosities. I shall endeavour to show the interactions between these levels of popular politics in Calcutta.

The Roots of Political Militancy

There were strong historical reasons why Calcutta, born as a nucleus of British imperial economic interests, should have been transformed into an important centre of political militancy. Paradoxical as it might seem, the cause lay in the economic expansion of Calcutta itself. The dominance of European capital was reflected in a strong feeling of 'racial antipathy' towards the Indian residents. As Rajat Ray has put it





2.1 Umeshchandra Banerji

in Calcutta it could not be asserted, as was claimed of Madras, that friendly relations existed between the two [European and Indian] races.... Because the stake of British capital was so large in Calcutta and its hinterland, racial antagonism was also all-pervasive there. (*Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875-1927*, 1984, pp. 21-23).

Racialism was encountered in Calcutta at various levels. Englishmen slapped, kicked and whipped the 'natives' and addressed them as 'niggers' and 'swine' without any hesitation. Murderous assaults on Indian servants were common. Indian men and women were frequently thrown out of railway carriages. Calcutta was dotted with exclusive European clubs whose doors were closed to the 'natives'. Appeals for redress were of no consequence as the licence for English arrogance was 'virtually built into the judicial system'. Indians did not always suffer racial oppression without protest. As early as 1893, *The Englishman* complained of increasing signs of resistance: Europeans are insulted, abused and jeered at by the lowest type of natives, and if they retaliate, they are set upon by a mob. The bitterness born of such mental antagonism exacerbated the intensity of Calcutta politics.

The growth of organized politics in Calcutta was also connected with a particular social development in the nineteenth century: the emergence of an educated middle class among the Bengali *bhadralok*. They provided the initial support for running a colonial state, but were soon at odds with the prevalent views of administration. Exposure to liberal-democratic bourgeois values through Western education, a flourishing press, voluntary associations and political pressure groups gave the *bhadralok* an ideological orientation that went against the grain of the 'power relationships' on which the earlier colonial administration had been reared. 'As a result', writes J. McGuire in *The Making of a Colonial Mind* (1983; pp. 120-21), the *bhadralok*

would become a more progressive, though not united, force by forging strong ties with classes more central to capitalist development. Their common ground would be defined by opposition to the colonial state in so far as it represented the interests of British capital.

The failure of the ablest *bhadraloks* such as Umeshchandra Banerji ('Woomesh Chunder' or W.C. Bonnerji) and Surendranath Banerji to

move up in the administrative hierarchy owing to sheer racial barriers drove the educated middle class to demand a more effective system of power-sharing. *Bhadralok* militancy acquired a new dynamism with the anti-Partition movement, an agitation which had a strong *bhadralok* base but significant popular ramifications. The transfer of the capital in 1912 dried up major sources of government jobs and patronage causing further erosion of the *bhadralok*'s role in colonial administration. Simultaneous to this came a general stagnation of *bhadralok* economic entrepreneurship. Material deprivation went hand in hand with the *bhadralok*'s increasing exposure to political discourse of all sorts — Gandhian, nationalist in both liberal and extremist veins, and communal — leading to his future involvement in the Congress movement, revolutionary terrorism and Hindu revivalist politics. At the other end of the elite political spectrum, the Muslims — who lagged far behind the Hindus in the race for shrinking government jobs and patronage — took recourse to separatist politics: a tendency patronized by the British to foster their policy of 'divide and rule'.

Parallel developments at the popular level reinforced these trends in Calcutta's elite political world. The administrative and economic pull of Calcutta had attracted migrants from its hinterland as well as other provinces, giving the city a cosmopolitan character. By 1901, the proportion of Calcuttans speaking Bengali had fallen to 51.3 per cent, while that of Hindustani speakers rose to 36.3 per cent. At the start of the century, two-thirds of the city's population were Hindus; of the rest, 30 per cent were Muslims. According to another estimate of the same period nearly 75 per cent of Calcutta's inhabitants could be classified as 'poor', including migrants working as labourers, artisans, and petty traders. Living conditions for these subordinate social groups were appalling. Ill-paid, subjected to economic and racial assaults, and deprived of state protection, they lived in insanitary crowded *bustees*.

Although belonging to the same economic stratum, the various social groups retained their individual religious and communal identities. Recent historians have thus emphasized the need to look at the 'community' rather than the 'class' consciousness of the embryonic industrial labour force in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Calcutta. The anthropolog-

ist Nirmal K. Basu in *Calcutta 1964: A Social Survey* (1968) also remarked:

The overlap in culture has been too small: class has not succeeded in dissolving linguistic or regional ties, or even in obliterating cultural differences to any appreciable extent.

Nevertheless, these subordinate social groups remained a volatile element and a support base for political militancy in Calcutta. Given the fragmented nature of their identities, it is perhaps not so surprising that they were active participants both in united anti-imperialist struggles and internecine communal conflicts.

Economic pressures often provided other and more immediate motivations for militancy: for instance, the dislocations following from the First and Second World Wars or the 1930s depression. The man-made Bengal famine of 1943, which took away 1.17 million lives in one single year, did not provoke any popular protest but nonetheless unsettled the balance of Calcutta society. 'Famine victimization', as Paul Greenough's *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-44* (1982) has revealed, not only destroyed lives; it wrecked the moral and social bonds of the poorer citizens. Contemporary accounts provide enough evidence to construct a picture of the 'social fate of famine beggars' who were looked down upon as 'befouled, inauspicious and set apart from the rest of the society'. Das in his *Bengal Famine* (1943) describes how the destitutes would search for vegetable skins and rotten fruit.

They collected the former from the streets and the latter from near about the fruit stalls in the markets. The receptacles of street garbage were regularly haunted...

The dehumanizing impact of the Famine led to a brutalization of human consciousness that perhaps prepared Calcutta for the communal killings of August 1946. The subsequent trauma of the Partition of India, and the influx of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) with little to fall back upon - a theme brilliantly documented in the films of Ritwik Ghatak - created a new reservoir of strength for Calcutta's political world, a source which provides much of the sustenance for current agitational politics that still have their epicentre in the city.

A Historical Outline

1912 - 1920

The post-1912 years anticipated many of the later trends in popular politics in Calcutta. The First World War dislocated the economic balance and led to more acute conflicts of view between the Indians and the British, particularly with regard to the drain of wealth, deindustrialization, rising revenue demands and the stultification of indigenous commerce and industry. While revolutionary terrorism continued unabated, moderate Calcutta politicians like Bhupendranath Basu (1859-1924) favoured the adoption of any course that would lift the Congress out of the rut into which it had fallen. Calcutta responded favourably to the 1916 Lucknow Pact by which the Congress sought to secure Hindu-Muslim unity from the top through a bargain reached with the Muslim leaders over distribution of legislative seats. But the communal element in Calcutta politics soon surfaced when in 1918 the city experienced the first major Hindu-Muslim riot of the present century.

The 1918 outbreak disrupted normal life in Calcutta from 9 to 11 September. Although it bore some appearances of a Hindu-Muslim conflict, it also revealed shifting levels of violence. The riot was provoked by communal issues such as the disrespect shown to the Prophet by a leading daily newspaper; but it lapsed into the collective violence of working-class Muslims against such symbols of class and colonial exploitation as the Marwaris, the Europeans and the police, who were seen as the

2.2 Famine sketch, 1943. Atul Basu



contradictions opened up by the First World War. Significantly enough, the established Muslim leadership allied with the colonial authorities to restrain the escalating popular violence.

In 1919, Mahatma Gandhi launched a movement against the severe restrictions on civil liberties imposed by the Rowlatt Act. Calcutta's participation in the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919 represented the City's effective initiation into mainstream nationalism under Gandhian leadership. The sources of Calcutta's discontent reflected an all-India trend: anger against the repressive Rowlatt Act, promulgated despite Indian support to the British War efforts; popular Muslim resentment at the British treatment of the Caliphate (Khilafat); widespread economic discontent caused by a rising price-curve and general depression resulting from the War. Gandhi's call for a movement against the Rowlatt Act helped to unite the varying strata of popular dissatisfaction. The Mahatma's arrest on 10 April near Delhi finally brought the Calcuttans onto the streets. Normal life in the city was disrupted from the 11th to the 13th.

Barely six months after the September communal riots, April 1919 witnessed remarkable Hindu-Muslim fraternity. Hindu Bengalis, Marwaris and upcountrymen marched together with Muslims in processions, singing national songs and shouting *Bande Mataram*. In public rallies, Marwari priests put vermilion marks on the foreheads of Muslims while the Hindus lent their voices to shouts of *Ali Ali*. A joint Hindu-Muslim meeting was even held inside the Nakhoda mosque, addressed amongst others by the Mahatma's son Hiralal Gandhi.

Expressions of anti-government feelings were marked in the Rowlatt Satyagraha. There were few physical attacks on Europeans, but certain aspects of popular action revealed the intense anti-European psychology of the crowd. Europeans were made to disembark from trams, buses and private vehicles, and were forced to take off their *topes* and proceed bareheaded; European women were chased by crowds shouting *Gandhi ki jai*. The police, as another visible manifestation of the Raj, also became a natural target of collective violence. Police parties were pelted with bricks, stones, lumps of wood and aerated-water bottles. Police posts were set on fire. *The Englishman* of 14 April 1919 describes a typical scene:



On Harrison Road men armed with scaffolding bamboos ran up to the vehicle shouting *Nai jane dega* [We shall not allow you to go]. The European sergeant replied *Jaye-ga, Hut jao* [We shall go, move away]. ... [Instantly] the crowd closed round [the police] and stones began to fly, rattling on the body and hood of the car. The men with the bamboos thrust them in front of the car... There were shouts of *Mar Sala* and *Mar dalo* [Beat them]

The spread of the disturbance was associated with a shift in the leadership. While the initial rallies adopting the Satyagraha pledge were of a 'composite' nature comprising lawyers, teachers, students, merchants and 'the general populace', the initiative for action gradually passed to the 'ordinary people', especially the upcountrymen - Hindus and Muslims alike. The government itself acknowledged the breaking of the monopoly control over political agitation by a handful of educated persons and admitted that the dumb had become voiced. *The Kalikata Samachar* (8 April 1919) commented that the events in Calcutta had exploded the myth 'circulated by the Anglo-Indian press that the untouchable and illiterate do not know what political agitation is...'. But even this popular radicalism tended irresistibly to shelter behind the Mahatma's banner.

This increasing participation from the lower social strata caused the riot to spread. The established leaders, both Hindu and Muslim, grew alarmed and issued manifestos condemning the disturbances. The Indian Muslim Association and the Committee of the Central Muhammadan Association even questioned the decision to allow non-Muslims to preach from the pulpit of the Nakhoda mosque. The Moderates—the section of Congressmen believing in constitutional agitation rather than the new 'passive resistance'—also disliked the degeneration of the Satyagraha, and their leader Surendranath Banerji (1848–1925) 'unhesitatingly' approved of Governor Ronaldshay's plan to censure the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* for 'pouring poison into the minds of the youth of the country'.

September 1920 saw the next important event in Calcutta's participation in the Congress nationalist agitation. The occasion was the Special Session of the Indian National Congress in the city. It was resolved to initiate, under Gandhi's leadership, a non-cooperation movement to support the Khilafat agitation, started in 1920 by Muhammad Ali and Shaukat

Ali to move the British Government over its Turkish policy; to demand the punishment of Sir Michael O'Dwyer and other officials for the Jalianwala Bag massacre and other 'Punjab wrongs' during the Rowlatt Satyagraha; and to press for the establishment of *Swarajya* to 'vindicate national honour'. The Non-cooperation Movement, says Sumit Sarkar, was possibly the point of greatest strength and unity in the entire history of the national movement in Bengal. (*Modern India 1885-1947*, 1986, p. 218) Nationalist lawyers such as Chittaranjan Das (1870-1925) renounced lucrative practices; others like Subhashchandra Basu (1897-1945?) refused to take up a career in the colonial bureaucracy; students left schools and colleges to court arrest in their hundreds. Women in large numbers followed Basanti Debi (1880-1974), the wife of Chittaranjan Das, to enrol themselves as Congress volunteers for the first time, and such subordinate social groups as Muslim boatmen and millhands were brought into mainstream nationalism. The successful *hartal* against the visit of the Prince of Wales on 17 November 1921 marked the height of the Non-cooperation Movement in Calcutta. To quote a contemporary account in the *Indian Annual Register* of 1922 (p. 227):

[Calcutta] looked like a deserted city. All Indian shops, bazars, markets, including the great business quarters, were closed. There was no tram, nor any sort of vehicular traffic in the streets... All mills were closed and the mill-hands occupied themselves with singing *bhajans* [religious songs] and taking ablutions in the river... The European business offices had to stop work owing to the absence of the Indian staff. The Courts and Government offices had similarly to close down... In the night the greater part of the town was in darkness as no lights were lighted... It was remarkable how the Goliath of Western civilization, the London of the Far East... could come to a sudden stop led by the finger of the man thousands of miles away.

Even the police was affected by the rising tide of nationalism: many members resigned and a senior official lamented disaffection among his men.

1921 - 1929

Gandhi's sudden withdrawal of the Non-cooperation agitation following the killing of twenty-two policemen by a violent mob at Chauri Chaura in U.P., and the systematic government repression of nationalist organiza-



tions, put a sharp brake on popular militancy in India. Mass agitational politics in Calcutta too suffered from a general decline and fragmentation. While the established leaders of the Bengal Congress frittered their energies away on factional squabbles and Calcutta Corporation politics, a section of disillusioned educated Calcutta youth found an outlet through acts of revolutionary terrorism. This reached a climax in January 1924 when Gopinath Saha (1906-1924) shot dead an Englishman named Day instead of his real target, the hated Calcutta Police chief Charles Tegart. But the repressive Bengal Ordinance of October 1924, together with the failure of the terrorists to ensure sustained social support, reduced the spate of revolutionary actions at least till the 1930s.

Calcutta politics lost its mass nationalist thrust once the Khilafat movement petered out. This may lead one to ask: was Calcutta prone only to all-India agitational initiatives? It is difficult to answer this question. But the fact remains that the ebb in nationalist agitations coincided with increasing communal tensions in Calcutta. This was amply manifested in 1926 in three successive bouts of Hindu-Muslim riots: from 2 to 14 April, 22 April to 8 May and 11 to 25 July. The immediate cause of the first outbreak was the playing of music before a mosque. The second was prompted by a street brawl in central Calcutta. The third was connected with a number of Hindu processions.



2.4 Bina Das

These riots displayed many similarities with the 1918 outbreak. The Muslim wrath was focused on the Marwari and Bhatia merchants; the transport system and police remained favourite targets of collective violence; temples and mosques were desecrated on a large scale; shops dealing with consumer goods continued to be the main objects of the looters. The participating crowd again mostly comprised upcountry Hindus and Muslims of the lower social strata.

Yet a certain change could be noticed in the pattern of violence in 1926. This was apparent in greater organization and planning. The Hindu crowd used the houses of their political leaders as bases of operation; the Arya Samajists dressed as Muslims and made 'feigned' attacks on Hindus to incite the latter; Muslims in Central Calcutta *bustees* were encouraged to rise up by the beating of drums. Significantly, the growing violence was accompanied by the emergence of local leaders among such subordinate social groups as carters, butchers, boatmen, doorkeepers, sweepers, coachmen and other men 'on the spot'. As during earlier riots, both Hindu and Muslim leaders condemned 'the violence' and issued appeals to the 'brains and organizations behind the scenes'.

However, Calcutta witnessed a resurgence of nationalist politics after 1927. Following the repugnant appointment of the all-white Simon Commission in November 1927 to review the Indian political situation, *hartals* and joint Hindu-Muslim demonstrations displaying black flags and shouting 'Go back Simon' became regular occurrences in Calcutta. Sir John Simon's arrival in Bombay on 3 February 1928 was received with a *hartal*; protest rallies were held in all the Calcutta Corporation wards urging the people to boycott British goods. This anti-Simon agitation marked the formal entry of Calcutta students to mainstream nationalism and began, as Sumit Sarkar (p. 266) puts it, the period of 'youth conferences and associations, and rising demands for complete independence and radical social and economic changes'. Commenting on the 'unprecedented success of the hartal', the *Forward* of 4 February remarked: '[It] gave the people a faint vision of Swaraj when they would be masters in their own household'. The *Vishwamitra* also noted in the same vein on 6 February: '[The hartal showed that] the aspiration and political ambi-

tions of a country cannot be repressed by violence or brute force'.

Contemporary newspapers are replete with accounts of police repression of this resurgent nationalism. But the 'protest mentality' instilled among the people could not be suppressed - a fact amply demonstrated during the forty-third session of the Indian National Congress held at Calcutta on 29 December 1928. Perhaps for the first time in the history of the Congress, nearly 20,000 workers and peasants independently marched to the site of the session 'to assert their right' under the Congress banner. The Congress session had to be adjourned for an hour and such personalities as Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Basu and even Gandhi had to address the gathering and accept the following resolution:

We, the workers and peasants of the land shall not rest till complete independence is established and all exploitation from capital and imperialism cease. We do call upon the National Congress to keep that goal before them and organize the national forces for that purpose.

Such popular interventions not only indicated the rising expectations of the people but also contributed in widening the base of the Congress. Thus, throughout 1928-29 the two 'leftist' leaders of the Congress - Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Basu - addressed a large number of youth conferences in Calcutta, urging the audience to learn from the youth movements in Europe and calling the attainment of independence the prelude to a 'communistic society'.

Not surprisingly, Subhash called 1928-29 the 'most encouraging' year. He instilled revolutionary zeal in a considerable number of Calcutta youths and demonstrated it by organizing during the 1928 Congress session a paramilitary parade of his volunteers with himself on horseback as General Officer Commanding. To quote Tanika Sarkar (*Bengal 1928-1934: The Politics of Protest*, 1987, p. 25):

With Bose as the President of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, the hold of the more militant youths on the organization increased noticeably and the distinction between radical young volunteers and actual revolutionary terrorists was often blurred.

The agitational mood of Calcutta was also demonstrated during the All-Bengal Khadi Exhibition of October 1928 through patriotic

magic lantern shows, anti-government posters, dagger play and the display of pictures of nationalist heroes. When Gandhi was arrested while presiding over a public bonfire of foreign cloth in the city, a militant agitation took form over the boycott of foreign cloth. Hindus and Muslims of all social categories from labourers to Marwari traders, as well as upper and middle class women, became involved in the movement.

1930-37.

The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 began slowly in Bengal, thanks to factional squabbles within the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee and the preoccupation of provincial leaders with Calcutta Corporation politics. Subsequently, however, the Movement acquired a remarkable intensity from its own impetus. Jawaharlal's arrest on 15 April and Gandhi's imprisonment in early May brought the Calcutta crowd out onto the streets. Students fought the police; tramcars, other vehicles and fire engines were burnt; Europeans were assaulted. These incidents, signalling a total departure from non-violent principles, were also notable for the widespread participation of transport workers, among them many Sikhs, Oriya coolies and upcountry carters. A boycott of football matches and film shows was also advocated so that the people would not be diverted from Civil Disobedience; at least two Calcutta soccer clubs, the Aryans and Mohan Bagan, cancelled some fixtures. As in other parts of the country, this process of radicalization alienated the propertied classes and largely contributed to Gandhi's compromise with the Raj in the Poona Pact of 1932.

This settlement came as a severe jolt to Hindu political interests in Calcutta. Under the new scheme, Hindu representation in the Bengal legislature was perceived to have fallen far below what was considered appropriate to their cultural and economic advancement. This sentiment was shared by all sections of Hindus, as appears from a petition signed by a whole range of personalities from Rabindranath Thakur (Tagore), Praphullachandra Ray and Sharatchandra Chatterji to Jugalkishore Birla and Rai Jatindranath Choudhuri. The Hindu Mahasabha was quick to capitalize on this sense of Hindu deprivation, which strengthened Hindu identity on the one hand and produced a poor

response in Calcutta when Gandhi renewed the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1932.

The first half of the 1930s also witnessed perhaps the last phase of revolutionary terrorism in Calcutta. In 1930 Dalhousie Square, seat of the chief government offices, was rocked by bombs, and the Writers' Buildings or Secretariat was itself raided by Binaykrishna Basu (1908-30), Badal Gupta (1912-30) and Dineshchandra Gupta (1911-31) – the revolutionaries after whom the Square has now been renamed. Charles Tegart, the Police Commissioner, himself escaped an attempt on his life that year. In 1932 Bina Das (1911-86), a young woman student, fired at Governor Jackson during the convocation of Calcutta University. Another memorable day for revolutionary terrorism was 24 May 1933 when the three most wanted



From the top
2.5 Lathi-charge on a nationalist gathering at the Maidan, 26 January 1931

2.6 Tramcar set on fire, 15 April 1930

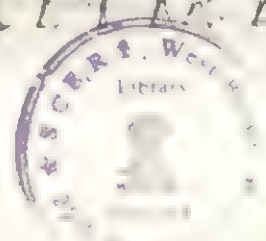
2.7 Policemen on patrol, 15 April 1930



SECRET, WEST BENGAL

Dec. 1933

4354



Calcutta: The Living City

Left to right :

2.8 Binaykrishna Basu

2.9 Badal Gupta

2.10 Dineshchandra
Gupta

Below :
2.11 Scavengers
on strike :
volunteers at work



terrorists – Nalini Das (1910-34), Dinesh Majumdar (1907-34) and Jagadananda Mukherji – fought a revolver battle with the police from a house in Cornwallis Street before surrendering themselves.

Revolutionary terrorism certainly shook the confidence of the administration; but it also perturbed the mainstream nationalists. By 1934 the government had more or less successfully suppressed the main threat from the revolutionaries, who nevertheless left behind a source of inspiration for future generations in their struggle for a more just society.

A striking feature of the nationalist agitations in Calcutta in the 1930s was the substantial participation of women. They marched in the funeral procession of Chittaranjan Das, which clashed with the police. Women picketed foreign cloth and liquor stores and joined rallies and processions, suffering imprisonment and police atrocities in the process. In their search for suspected ringleaders, the police did not even hesitate to enter college buildings and beat up women students and teachers. Such repressive measures could not, however, halt the growing political consciousness of Calcutta women. To quote *Advance* (21 August 1930):

The alacrity and self-sacrifice with which the Indian woman has stepped forward from the cosy seclusion of the purdah into the din and turmoil of the world outside is a remarkable phenomenon in India... Ladies belonging to the highest and most respected families..., old ladies of 70 and young girls of 16 have vied with each other to prove to a world struck with wonder and with awe that Indian nationalism is not an offspring of questionable origin, but born and nurtured in the ancient bosom of a great Mother, who had in her own youth rocked the cradle of civilization.

The new self-awareness among Calcutta women also found expression in attempts to develop a collective female identity among women at large. The rising consciousness of Calcutta's women in this period has been treated elsewhere in this volume.

The labouring class also left their mark on Calcutta politics in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Calcutta scavengers, dock and transport workers, railwaymen and millhands were particularly active in ventilating their class grievances. Tanika Sarkar (p. 57) has shown how in times of labour violence 'symbols of ritual and occupational degradation could be turned into weapons of strength'. For instance, when in April 1928 striking Hindu women scavengers clashed with Anglo-Indian police sergeants, they hurled pots of excreta at the latter, making them flee tearing off their uniforms and vowing never to return until they got permission to fire.

Instances of cross-professional solidarity among the Calcutta working class were also manifest. Thus in April 1933, after the police had fired on a crowd of striking Calcutta dustmen, hundreds of carters and labourers of various descriptions came out on the streets in protest and paralysed road traffic.

Two labour strikes were particularly successful. First, the 1929 strike in the jute mills forced the abandonment of a plan to extend working-hours from 54 to 60 per week. Again, in April 1930 the carters had demonstrated against an official move to prohibit the transport of goods during the afternoon. Barricades were constructed with carts to paralyse all city traffic, forcing the government into a compromise settlement.



Some scholars emphasize the 'autonomy' of such subaltern actions as the carters' strike. But the carters' movement was not necessarily divorced from all organizational networks and mediations. Communist activists such as Abin Momin (1906-83) took a leading part in organizing the carters and other labouring groups; *chowdhris* such as Ramlogan Singh also had links with local Congress Committees. Secret meetings were held in leaders' houses, and volunteers sent to estimate the number of carters killed or wounded by police firing.

In fact, it was in the 1930s that the Communists established their hold over labour politics in Calcutta, if not Bengal. The 'Left' within the Congress under Subhash Basu and Jawaharlal Nehru did appeal to workers 'to unite, organize and join hands with the Congress' through open rallies, as at Calcutta in October 1937. But the trade union movement in and around Calcutta remained under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and other leftist groups, where leaders like Abdul Halim (1904-66), Somnath Lahiri (1909-84), Ranen Sen and Muzaffar Ahmed (1889-1973) first rose to prominence. The greater appeal of the Communists over the Congress-Khilafat combination can be partly explained by the conscious effort of early Communists to declass themselves from their petty *bhadralok* background, and the dissemination of Communist ideology through propaganda literature and populist campaigns.

1937-1947

The legislative elections of 1937 brought about a temporary decline of mainstream nationalist forces in Calcutta politics. No party won an absolute majority; the Muslim League joined the Krishak Praja Party to form a coalition ministry under Fazlul Haq (1873-1962). This enabled the Muslim League to consolidate its position in institutional politics. Within the Congress itself, the ouster of Subhash Basu in 1939 after his clash with Gandhi at the Tripuri session resulted in rightwingers and astute Gandhians such as Praphullachandra Ghosh and Kiranshankar Ray (1891-1949) assuming charge of the Bengal Congress. There was also an ebb in subaltern militancy, perhaps because the Communist Party, having being declared illegal, had to operate as an underground organization. The only instance of a strong

popular agitation was the successful movement of July 1937, when at the instance of various students' organizations, a spate of *hartals*, demonstrations and rallies were held in Calcutta to demand the release of political prisoners. The Bengal Government ultimately arrived at a compromise by releasing all political prisoners except those serving long-term sentences.

The outbreak of the Second World War dramatically changed the Indian political situation. Calcutta could not remain untouched. The city shared the general national grievance that the Viceroy had unilaterally declared India's participation in the British War effort without consulting any Indian political party. The German victory at Dunkirk and the fall of France began a new trend among certain Bengali politicians to exploit the British predicament by forging alliances with the Axis powers. This found most concrete expression in Subhash Basu's dramatic escape from Calcutta and his formation of the Indian National Army (INA) to liberate India with Japanese help.

The successful advance of the Japanese to Rangoon in February 1942 brought the War to the very borders of India. Mobilization of popular Indian support was indispensable for the British War effort. This induced the Raj to offer new political concessions which provided the immediate perspective for the Cripps Mission of 1942. But the Cripps offer failed, and in August 1942 Gandhi made the final call

2.12 Handcart-pullers' strike, 5 April 1930





to 'Do or Die'. The Quit India Movement in Bengal is usually believed to have assumed a primarily rural character. But Calcutta also witnessed a series of successful *hartals* from 10 to 17 August. Even in upper-class and European quarters of the city, there were acid-bulb attacks on tram passengers, and processions came out regularly shouting '*Ingrej Bharat Chharo*' (Englishmen, quit India') and protesting against the presence of American troops.

Calcutta experienced a resurgence of popular agitational politics in 1945-46, the years which have been aptly described by Gautam Chatterji as 'The Almost Revolution'. Already in July 1940, a broad anti-imperialist front of the Congress, the Muslim League and the Communists had organized a successful movement to remove a monument erected at Dalhousie Square (now B.B.D. Bag) in memory of J.Z. Holwell, the main proponent of the maliciously exaggerated story of the Black Hole of Calcutta. The victory of the democratic forces in the Second World War, the emergence of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, the new resurgent trend in the People's Democratic Revolution in China, the anti-colonial upsurge in South-East Asia and the Labour Party's victory in the British parliamentary elections – all these fired the

popular imagination throughout India, and Calcutta was no exception.

The turning point came when the British decided to hold public trials of about 20,000 INA captives. Calcutta was the first centre to rise against this grotesque insult to a 'lost cause'. Subhash was a popular hero among the Bengalis, and this attack upon his political creation came at a moment when Calcutta was reeling under unemployment, inflation and a general economic crisis. The city was now rocked by a series of popular outbreaks which have been compared to the *journées* or 'days of movements' in Revolutionary Paris.

On 21 November 1945, student organizations of many political shades – Communist, Muslim League and Forward Bloc – marched in a body towards Dalhousie Square to protest against the INA trials. To quote a contemporary account by Gautam Chatterji, then a Communist student leader:

Some 50 thousand had jampacked Wellington Square. The tri-colour and students' flags were everywhere. Suddenly from Wellesley Street, we saw a big procession of Muslim students, carrying Muslim League flags, coming towards Wellington Square. These were the students of Islamia College [now Maulana Azad College]. Hundreds of students from the central rally rushed forward, embraced the demonstrators and tied the Muslim League flags together with the tri-colour. At once the whole rally burst into thunderous slogans: Hindu-Muslim Unity *Zindabad*.

When the police stopped the procession from entering Dalhousie Square, the students sat down on Cornwallis Street and remained there the whole night. The Government attempted to disperse the squatters by force. Two students – significantly, one Muslim and one Hindu – died on the spot. The violence spread over the next two days, with Sikh taxi drivers, tramway workers, municipal employees, carters and mill hands taking a leading role in putting up street barricades, burning cars and attacking the police. Official observers deplored the violence but were impressed by the way the crowd stood their ground against the police. Three days of turbulence left 33 civilians killed and 200 injured.

Interestingly enough, the established leadership, as on earlier occasions, disapproved of this radicalism and advised restraint. Congress rightwingers such as Vallabhbhai Patel of Maharashtra ridiculed the frittering

away of energies in encounters with the police; Gandhi began 'friendly' talks with the Bengal Governor, and the Calcutta Session of the Congress Working Committee formally emphasized its faith in non-violent modes of political action.

Such moves could not, however, check popular anger against the insults to national pride. In less than three months, Calcutta saw yet another remarkable spate of popular protest. The sentence of rigorous imprisonment imposed on Abdul Rashid of the INA occasioned a students' strike called jointly by the Muslim League and the CPI. The working class soon entered the scene when a Communist-led general strike brought industrial Calcutta to a halt on 12 February 1946. On the same day, there was an unprecedented rally at Wellington Square addressed by representatives of all the political bodies - Hussain Shahid Suhrawardy (1893-1963) of the Muslim League, Somnath Lahiri of the CPI and Satish Dasgupta (1880-1979) of the Congress. Clashes between the police and the crowd continued for two consecutive days, leaving at least 84 dead and 300 injured.

The restiveness of the labouring poor spread with great rapidity, as is evident from the strike threats of railway workers and postal and government employees against rising prices and ration cuts. Incidentally, this was the time of the emergence of 'effective country-wide labour organizations': Calcutta, with its rich tradition of labour politics, responded enthusiastically to this trend.

While the police and officials lamented the turbulent times, the Calcutta intelligentsia immortalized them: Sukanta Bhattacharya (1926-47) and Subhash Mukherji (1919-) in their poems, Manik Banerji (1908-57) and Tarashankar Banerji (1898-1971) through their novels and Salil Choudhuri in his music. Calcutta also hosted a number of conferences of the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association, a body of progressive cultural workers determined to fight fascism and all forms of reaction.

This spectacular display of the secular anti-imperialist spirit of the Calcutta populace received a crucial setback with the communal hysteria that gripped the city in August 1946. The immediate context of the Great Calcutta Killing from 16 to 19 August was the failure of the Cabinet Mission to bring about a broad

agreement on India's 'constitutional issue', and the Muslim League's call for a 'Direct Action' to achieve Pakistan. But there is evidence of a growing 'psychological crystallization' of communal identity at the popular level among both Hindus and Muslims from the 1940s. This resulted from the increasing strength of communal elements in organized politics following the establishment of the League government in Bengal, the growth of Hindu revivalist organizations and their connections with the Bengal Congress, the impact of sustained propaganda for and against Pakistan, a general shift in the balance within Hindu and Muslim leadership from the religious to the political, and the catalytic influence of the Constituent Assembly elections in fostering communal identities rather than leftist or nationalist consciousness.

16 August was declared a public holiday. The League also sought to organize a general *hartal*, while the Hindus tried to keep up normal life. Minor confrontations began from the morning, but disturbances started on a large scale in the afternoon, as Muslim processionists returned from a public rally for 'Direct Action Day'.

The 1946 riot was significantly different from earlier communal outbreaks in the city. It was more organized, directly connected with institutional politics, and hence, in the prevailing climate, more exclusively related to communal politics as well. The League not only utilized its control over the government machinery to mobilize the Muslim community for 'Direct Action Day'; once the riot spread, Mayor Osman and Chief Minister Suhrawardy, along with his cabinet colleagues, personally intervened for the release of Muslim rioters arrested by the police. On the other hand, the Congress became largely associated with the Hindu crowd.

Certain features of the riot indicate considerable planning before and during each outbreak: attacking shops and houses in a similar manner at a particular time, marking Muslim shops to prevent their being looted by the Muslim crowd, and using Red Cross flags to evade the police and members of the rival community. The crowd no longer consisted overwhelmingly of subordinate social groups, but became a mixture of the upper and lower strata. For the first time, Bengali Hindus and Muslims joined their co-religionists of upcountry origin on a large scale. While the earlier riots were mostly characterized by looting and other forms of



violence committed by large crowds, the 1940s also saw the killing of individuals by small groups. The emphasis was now not on economic gain but on revenge and humiliation of the members of the rival community. This rite of violence displayed communal animosity at its peak.

The Great Calcutta Killing, which initiated the Partition Riots of 1946-47, left a profound impact. On the one hand, these clashes presaged an administrative breakdown which made the Viceroy Lord Wavell suggest an early termination of the Raj. At the same time, as I have tried to argue elsewhere, the riots reconciled a large section of subordinate social groups, among both Hindus and Muslims, to the idea of Partition. This was reflected in the changed attitude of nationalist Muslims and the Congress leadership (except Gandhi), whose secular stance gave way to the acceptance of Pakistan as the only real alternative. Muslim and Hindu communal identities had assumed a clear political complexion, nourished by propaganda and hardened by the riots of the 1940s.

The communal carnage did not, however, destroy the potential for anti-imperialist mass struggle across religious lines. Thus on 21 January 1947, barely five months after the riots of August 1946, Hindu and Muslim students joined in 'Hands off Vietnam' demonstrations, demanding an end to the use of Calcutta airport by French aircraft fighting the anti-colonial movement in Indo-China. The tramwaymen waged a successful eighty-five day strike under Communist leadership. Workers in the port

and engineering industries downed their tools on a number of occasions.

Until the last moment, the political pendulum in Bengal continually swung between nationalist and separatist politics; but ultimately mainstream nationalism lost most of its politicized Muslim elements, and a section within it developed a strong Hindu communal identity. Consequently, Calcutta came to suffer from a rather desperate introversion of consciousness, cut off from national events, obsessed by its own uncertainties, unsure whether it would go to Pakistan or not. This sense of pain and alienation was compounded by the influx of refugees and the inability to integrate with the national mainstream after the 'truncated settlement' of 1947.

Placed in this historical context, it is not difficult to appreciate why the political history of modern Calcutta largely constitutes a 'politics of protest'. Hartals, riots, insurrections, demonstrations and rallies have continued to be a recurrent feature in the life of Calcutta. To observers from outside – Indian and foreign alike – this has created a notorious stereotype of the city. But there is a clear historical logic behind Calcutta's political restiveness. Calcuttans have continually upheld the belief that 'when order is injustice disorder is the beginning of justice'. Much of the political life of Calcutta has been motivated by an alternative world-view. Enthusiastic Calcuttans draw sustenance from this creative force in the city's political culture. Others, perhaps, have nightmares that the nation might think tomorrow what Calcutta thinks today.



THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF CALCUTTA



Partha Chatterjee

I

It is a common enough impression that Calcutta and politics go hand in hand. Sweltering metropolis of squalor and wretchedness, cauldron of agitation and political violence, Calcutta seems to fit almost anybody's description of the perennially explosive Third World city. Like most common sayings, however, this too consists of a large overlay of myth around a small kernel of truth.

Calcutta earned its reputation for political volatility in the early decades of this century when revolutionary nationalist groups began to carry out, with varying degrees of effectiveness, their secret plans of political assassination, thus becoming targets of repression for the colonial authorities and subjects of awe and veneration for the people. The more searing distinctions that were added to this reputation in the 1960s and early 1970s appear only to cap a series of increasingly violent agitational mobilizations. What is often overlooked is that the character of the city's politics had changed enormously between those two periods. The differences come out more clearly when one looks at the continuities in the forms of political mobilization in Calcutta in the periods before and after 1947.

The relatively more permanent and formal organizations for large-scale political mobilization emerged in the city in the 1920s. The date coincides not only with the

commencement of mass mobilization by the Congress in the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movements but, more significantly for Bengal and Calcutta, with the participation of several groups of revolutionary terrorists in the organizational work of the Congress. The revolutionaries provided a permanent political cadre for Chittaranjan Das's Congress, and most units of the city's Congress committees were manned by them. After Das's death in 1925, the Congress was still dominated at the top by members of the city's Bengali elite, usually wealthy and successful professionals whose unending factional squabbles were the staple of political gossip in the 1920s and 1930s (and of the gossip-column variety of history-writing fashionable some twenty years ago). But the organizational work of the Congress was carried out in the city principally by former revolutionary activists, many of whom retained their secret networks and continued to recruit younger people for both open and underground political work.

Their activities of nationalist propaganda and recruitment were conducted not only through the formal channels of the local Congress committees, but far more widely and effectively through newspapers, publishing houses, local athletic clubs, cultural organizations, puja committees and various social work organizations, often with religious or quasi-religious affiliations. These channels of





political mobilization would continue to remain effective in the period after Independence.

It was again in the decade of the 1920s that political leaders owing direct allegiance to various groups within or around the Congress began serious organizational work in the trade unions of Calcutta. Political propaganda and recruitment were also carried out vigorously among the city's student population, in schools and colleges and especially in the many hostels and boarding houses for students coming from outside the city.

The creation in the 1920s of this relatively permanent organizational structure for political work also coincided with the victory of the Congress in the elections to the Calcutta Corporation in 1924. The suffrage was still highly restricted – only municipal taxpayers, a small fraction of the city's population, had the vote – but the Congress victory was an index of nationalist support among the city's middle class. It also gave the Congress a crucial means to create and sustain a permanent corps of political activists by using the administrative and financial resources of the municipal body. The use of government patronage in appointments and contracts in order to raise funds for political activities and to support a full-time cadre of political workers was yet another organizational instrument, developed on a small scale in the 1920s and 1930s, to be of major significance in the mass electoral politics of post-Independence Calcutta.

The gradual emergence in the late 1930s, from out of the broad platform of the Congress, of several political parties and organizations with distinct and often conflicting ideologies led to both a widening and a deepening of organized agitational activities among several sections of the city's population. On the one hand, there arose political groups with a Left orientation, often consisting once again of former revolutionary nationalists now professing a variety of socialist and Marxist ideologies. Through the 1930s and 1940s they gained and strengthened their positions among the city's trade unions and among students. The ideological and factional conflicts between these groups led to intense rivalries on those fronts: the differences between the Congress Socialists and the Communists, and those generated by the

emergence of the Trotskyist groups in the late 1930s, and the formation of Subhash Basu's Forward Bloc in 1939 were the most significant.

On the other hand, the collapse after his death of Chittaranjan Das's Hindu-Muslim Pact led to a spurt in communal conflicts in Bengal's politics. The formal leadership of those who claimed to be the representatives of Muslim opinion in the city had long rested with an elite group of wealthy businessmen, professionals and landlords, largely Urdu-speaking. They had developed ties of clientship with the city's Muslim working class and urban poor, most of whom were migrants from Bihar and UP. But by the 1920s, a significant Bengali Muslim middle class had also emerged, and a large part of this group consisted of those who had come from various eastern Bengal districts to study or work in the metropolis.

These were the people who provided intellectual and political leadership from the capital to the new Krishak Praja movement which was to sweep the eastern districts of Bengal in the mid-1930s. The demands of this movement related mainly to the grievances of small peasants against *zamindari* oppression; but given the pronounced pro-landlord sympathies of the provincial Congress and its overwhelmingly Hindu composition, it did not take long for the Krishak Praja movement to become implicated in the rapidly growing communal conflicts in Bengal's politics in the ten years preceding Independence and Partition.

By the time the successive shockwaves of war, famine and communal riots hit the city in the first half of the 1940s, therefore, a fairly elaborate organizational framework for competitive political mobilizations had already come into existence. As I have said before, most of these organizational forms would remain vital in both Congress and Opposition politics in the decades after Independence. However, to put things in perspective, it is important to note that there would occur in the later period an immense increase in the scale of mobilization.

In pre-Independence Calcutta, important political meetings, even those addressed by the foremost national leaders, were often held in halls with a capacity of three or four hundred. Open rallies or public demonstrations with thousands of participants were extremely rare.

Since the franchise was still greatly restricted, the scale of public campaigning for legislative elections, even those held in 1936 or 1946, could hardly compare with that of the general elections in post-Independence Calcutta. It is ironic that the most volatile large-scale political mobilization in the history of Calcutta before 1947 occurred at the time of the communal riots of August 1946. Though organized to a large extent outside the direct control of recognized political groups or leaders, it affected the life of every inhabitant of the city for several days.

II

The most dramatic change that took place in Calcutta in the years after Independence was in its demographic and territorial space. This change had far less to do with any economic process of urbanization than with the consequences of a political event: the partition of the province into East Pakistan and West Bengal. The flow of refugees from the eastern parts of Bengal into and around Calcutta occurred in several spurts from 1947 to 1971. A small part of this influx was housed in government transit camps, but the overwhelming majority settled in squatters' colonies along the eastern fringes of the city: from Kalyani and Barrackpur in the north through Dumdum, Jadabpur, Tollyganj and Behala down to Sonarpur in the south, and then in the 1960s on the west bank of the Hugli as well, from Magra in the north to Uluberia in the south. As a result, what was previously a rural hinterland was transformed within two decades into an urban sprawl integrally linked to the core of the city.

As a trading and industrial metropolis, Calcutta was of course always a city of migrants. In the first half of the present century, the largest section of migrants were labourers from Bihar. By 1951, however, as much as 41.27 per cent of migrants in Calcutta proper were from East Pakistan, compared to 18.44 per cent from Bihar. In 1961, more than half of the migrants living in the urban areas of 24-Parganas (a region which included the industrial belt north of the city) consisted of refugees from Pakistan. Not surprisingly, this rapid, enforced and wholly chaotic demographic revolution had a massive impact on the economic, cultural and political character of the city.



Politically, however, the impact was not felt immediately. Through the 1950s, Calcutta's politics continued to be dominated by the Congress, which held the municipal body and nearly all of the legislative constituencies in the state capital. The Muslim political leadership, which was a strong force in Calcutta in the period of Fazlul Haq's Krishak Praja Party in the late 1930s and of H.S. Suhrawardy's refurbished Muslim League in the mid-1940s, largely migrated to East Pakistan. There were serious factional disputes within the Congress too, but these were on the whole settled with the ouster of Praphullachandra Ghosh's government in 1948 and the installation of Bidhan-chandra Ray (1882-1962) as Chief Minister with Atulya Ghosh (1904-86) as the principal party boss.

The Congress, working mainly through the organizational framework developed during the two previous decades, now established itself as the party of order, running the government and mobilizing support in its favour by appealing to its old nationalist credentials and its new programmes of Nehruvian socialism. Electorally, the inauguration of universal adult franchise did imply certain new conditions for the mobilization of popular support, but these were managed largely through the old machinery – the formal one of Congress committees and the informal networks of newspapers, cultural organizations, athletic clubs, schools and colleges, and social work agencies. Congress

3.1 *Laying the foundation stone of Mahajati Sadan, the 'hall of the great nation': Rabindranath and Subhashchandra present. 26 August 1939*

nominations for elections were usually awarded to candidates with an independent social standing, having the ability to raise their own resources for financing election campaigns and to organize the local 'vote banks' into votes for the Congress. The mechanisms of patronage, lobbying, connections between business and government mediated through the election machinery of the ruling party – all those worked to produce electoral support for the Congress. There was no doubt that the party continued to project the image of an organization dominated by the wealthy and the propertied, interested above all in maintaining the existing systems of power and privilege and incapable of tackling the rapidly escalating economic problems that were threatening to tear apart the social fabric of the city.

These latter problems were of course tied up with the growing crisis of the Indian economy whose full repercussions were to be felt in the mid-1960s. To the extent that this crisis particularly affected the urban population, there was no city in India where the problems were more acute than in Calcutta. Saddled as it was with a massive refugee population, Calcutta was perhaps the first city to be hit by a creeping industrial stagnation, rising foodgrain prices and shortages, lack of housing and the seemingly intractable problem of educated unemployment. Within ten years of Independence, when the dominant tone of political rhetoric in India was still that of enthusiasm for planning, industrial modernization and Nehruvian socialism, the voice of disenchantment was already beginning to be raised in the eastern metropolis.

3.2 Political rally at the Brigade Parade Ground



The growing influence of the Left, and especially of the Communist Party, in organizing this urban opposition to Congress rule was felt dramatically in the 1957 elections, when the Party won as many as fifteen Assembly seats from Calcutta and its industrial suburbs. The old institutions of mobilization among both white and blue-collar workers, students, and the network of cultural organizations were widened as well as strengthened for agitational politics by the Left parties. A particularly significant expression of this form of agitational opposition to government policies was the way in which massive demonstrations of tens of thousands of people – drawn from various parts of Calcutta, its suburbs and the neighbouring rural area – were organized in the centre of the city. The other instrument of mass agitation developed most effectively by the Left parties in Calcutta from the late 1950s was the general strike.

These efforts were answered by various administrative measures to impede or disrupt large public rallies and, on several occasions, by police repression including large-scale arrests and shootings on demonstrators. The economic failures of government policy were being met with a political challenge, and if Writers' Buildings, Raj Bhavan and the Assembly House were the centres from which the destiny of the state was being controlled by those who had mandate to rule, then Esplanade East, the Monument and the Brigade Parade grounds, lying just outside the protective cordon thrown around the citadels of power, were the new rallying-points of mass protest.

A less perceptible but no less rapid and enduring change was taking place in the thinking and attitudes of the most vocal, culturally organized and socially influential section of Calcutta's population – namely, its intelligentsia. With Partition and the abolition of *zamindari*, the middle class began to give to its cultural leadership over the people of the state a new interventionist edge. It saw itself in a transformative role, standing outside the systems of privilege and exploitation through which rich businessmen extracted huge profits while workers were left without subsistence, or landlords and rich peasants hoarded large stocks of grain while small peasants and sharecroppers sank deeper and deeper into debt. Cultural creation increasingly became an activity of self-questioning; the more the intelligentsia



asked itself what its role was to be in relation to the crisis that was rapidly overtaking the social world around it, the more political the answers became.

There was a structural peculiarity in all this. While the Bengali middle-class literati had made itself, and the city in which it lived, the unchallenged centre of cultural leadership for the state of West Bengal, it had virtually no participation in the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie which dominated the economy of Calcutta. The act of intervening in a crisis whose roots lay in a stagnant economy was therefore seen as a directly political act and an act whose justification flowed from the moral premisses of cultural vanguardism.

It would be an interesting inquiry to trace the many routes through which a new tone of social criticism, coupled with a radical activism, became the most prominent rhetorical device in the language of the Calcutta middle class from the mid-1960s. From street graffiti to the most highbrow literary periodical, the rhetoric of political radicalism was present everywhere – in literature, theatre, cinema, even those highly commodified forms of cultural production such as the pulp novel or the commercial *Jatra*. While

the rest of the country watched with surprise and awe the overt political turmoil in Calcutta and West Bengal between 1965 and 1975, the minds of those who led the people were also in a ferment. The words poured out in teashops, coffee-houses, students' common rooms, office canteens, political study-circles, journal offices and theatre rehearsal rooms.

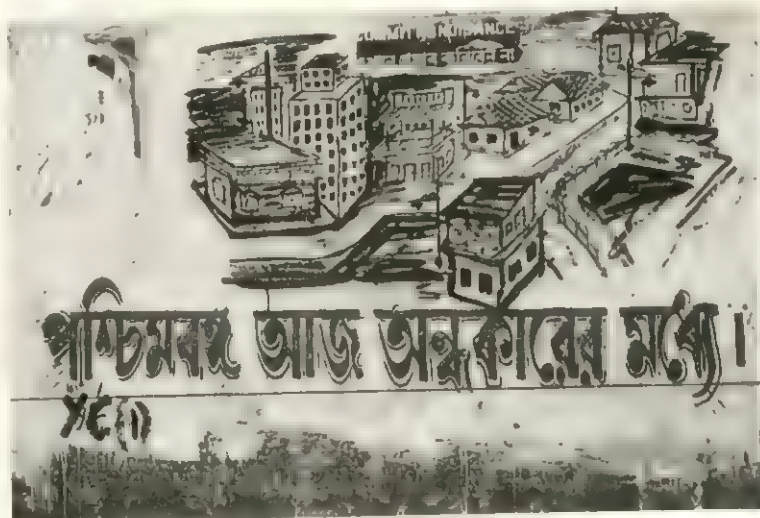
III

1967 saw a change in government, the first since Independence. It was a tenuous coalition of the Left parties with breakaway Congress groups. Relations within the Left were not particularly amicable either, for the two Communist parties born out of the split three years ago had gone into the 1967 elections as bitter antagonists: several constituencies in the city saw rival Communist candidates waging acrimonious campaigns against each other. The government was toppled in late 1968 – unjustly, the people thought, for they returned the United Front to power once again in 1969, but this time too the internal differences proved too strong for the government to last. In the meantime, a local peasant uprising in the foothills of Darjeeling sent shockwaves through the corridors of power in the state capital.

The history of 'Naxalite' violence, clashes with rival political groups, and the police repression which crushed the movement has been told often enough. What we need to recall

3.3 & 3.4

Political graffiti





3.5 Composite workshop for religious and political images

violence – the frenzied slogan-shouting, the exaggerated iconoclasm, the anger, impatience, intolerance, the mindless drive to hit out at the most immediate targets, indeed the sheer absence of a strategy of organization which led to the rapid collapse and liquidation of the movement – were born out of the state of ferment into which middle-class consciousness had led itself in the mid-1960s. The economic crisis was at its worst in those years. A whole generation of urban youth, a large part brought up in the squalor and deprivation of the refugee colonies, was facing a future that held no promises. The food movement of 1965 brought thousands of them into active politics, principally within the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The rapidly widening agitational politics – among the industrial working class, hard-hit by food shortages and rising prices, as well as in the countryside – provided avenues for vanguardist action by the politicized youth.

The conjunctures which marked the path from Naxalbari to the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), and to its subsequent collapse, are now a matter of political history. What has left its imprint on the life of the city is the memory of deserted streets, bomb blasts and running footsteps in the night; of combing operations and

'encounters', of torture and death in police stations and jails, and of the extinguishing of a few hundred young lives symbolizing the predictable death of a never-to-be-fulfilled dream.

The intensity of state repression unleashed in the city between 1970 and 1973 was of such a magnitude that, unlike many other parts of India, Calcutta saw little in the year and a half of the Emergency to add to what it already knew about the ways of an authoritarian regime. For nearly five years until the momentous elections of 1977, regular and organized oppositional politics had been made impossible. Thousands of political activists, both of the CPI(M) and the CPI(M-L), were in prison, while tens of thousands had been forced to move out of their homes. Leftist trade unions and front organizations retained only a skeletal existence, since no active agitational or organizational work was possible. The elections of 1977, of course, marked a reversal of fortunes: the Left Front government then instituted is now in power for an unprecedented third five-year term.

In retrospect, it is now clear that the years following Independence in fact marked the death of colonial Calcutta – the city of managing agencies, jute mills and the export trade, of the colonial civil service and



nationalist revolutionaries, of parvenu wealth and easy living, of genteel prose and lyrical poetry, of starvation deaths and communal riots. In its place, a new city was born, and the decade of the 1960s showed all the signs of painful adolescence.

Now, forty years after Independence and Partition, it has probably entered the stable routine of comfortable middle age. Property developers and speculators have turned the centre of the city into a high-rise slum for the affluent, while small savings, provident-fund loans and cooperative housing societies are quietly changing the squalid chaos of the refugee colonies into havens of middle-class respectability. The poor, whose labour and enterprise provide the life-blood for all productive activities and services in the city, are being rapidly banished to a still more distant periphery from where they commute daily to earn their livelihood in factories, trading centres, on the pavements and in the sweatshops of the 'informal sector'. It is this sector that sustains the economic life of a metropolis which has seen virtually no industrial growth in two decades.

The masses still gather for rallies at the Brigade Parade grounds, moving and dispersing with clockwork discipline as though in ritual celebration of great events that have passed into the mythical realms of collective memory. The two or three *bandhs* observed every year have developed their own routines: the commuters do not come, and the residents, eager not to miss out on the rare pleasure of




having a free run of the streets – their own streets – go in leisurely manner through the reassuring ceremonies of good neighbourliness.


Has the fire died? Or can it be that beneath the ashes left by that torrid decade, perhaps scattered now to the new peripheries of the city, the embers are still glowing? Only the future will tell.

Forty years is a short time in the life of a city, even a city whose official age is no more than three hundred years. But forty years of fervid politics can transform its soul.

3.6 Burning a political opponent in effigy



WOMEN IN CALCUTTA : THE YEARS OF CHANGE



Bharati Ray

In traditional Hindu society, the basic unit – the family – was patrilineal in descent, patrilocal in residence and patriarchal in authority. The denial of women's right to inheritance and gainful employment was ensured by denying them education and keeping them under purdah. This was the prevailing situation in early Calcutta as elsewhere in Bengal and, *mutatis mutandis*, in the rest of India.

The Nineteenth Century: Early Reforms

A change began in the nineteenth century when, chiefly through the new ideas brought by Western education, the improvement of the position of women became one of the main sectors of social reform. The Brahmo Samaj showed the way, and were soon joined by enlightened reformers from orthodox Hindu society like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. In the course of the century, *sati-pratha* or widow-burning was forbidden (1828), widow remarriage legalized (1856) and intercourse with wives below twelve years of age prohibited (1891). At the same time, and perhaps most vitally, a movement was started for female education.

With education, women acquired an awareness of their exploitation both individually and as a social group. Kailasbasini Debi's (1837-?) tract *Hindu Mahilaganer Hinabastha* ('The De-

graded Condition of Hindu Women', 1863) bears testimony to this perception. Purdah began to disappear among the educated Brahmo women, and many of them stepped outside the women's prescribed roles.

The women of the Thakur (Tagore) family deserve special mention here. Gnanadanandini Debi (1852-1941) went alone to the Governor-General's party, whereas her mother-in-law, if she wished to bathe in the Ganga, was immersed while still confined within her closed palanquin. Swarnakumari Debi (1855-1932) edited the prestigious journal *Bharati* and formed the 'Sakhi Samiti' or 'Women's Friendly Society' in 1886, one of the first women's organizations in India. Sarala Debi Choudhuran (1872-1945) took up a paid job far from home at the Maharani School in Mysore.

Women from other families joined the march. Chandramukhi Basu (1860-1944) and Kadambini Ganguli (1861-1923) graduated from Bethune College; the former became a teacher and the latter a practising physician. Other women followed in both professions, and many began not only to write but to publish their works. The 'caged birds' were attempting to fly.

Basically, however, the nineteenth century reforms did not aim to make women independent or equal partners of men in societal roles outside the domestic. They attempted to improve the position of women within the fami-

Facing page

Left :

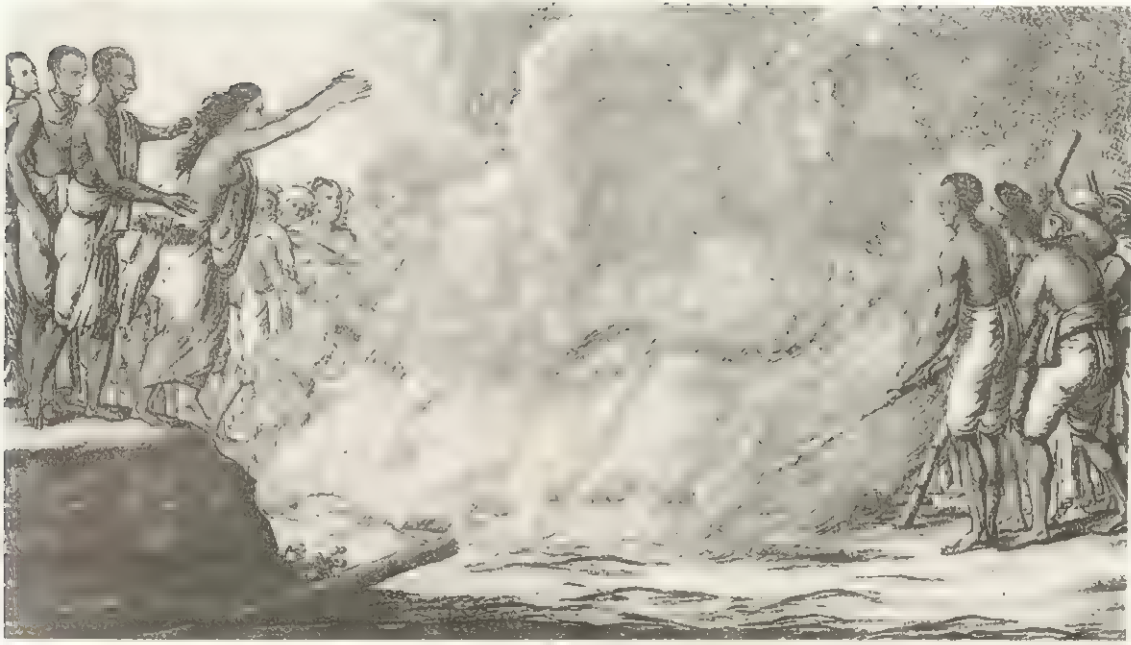
4.1 Sati. Solvyns

Right :

4.2 Chandramukhi
Basu

Below :

4.3 Laying the
foundation stone of
Bethune College, 1850



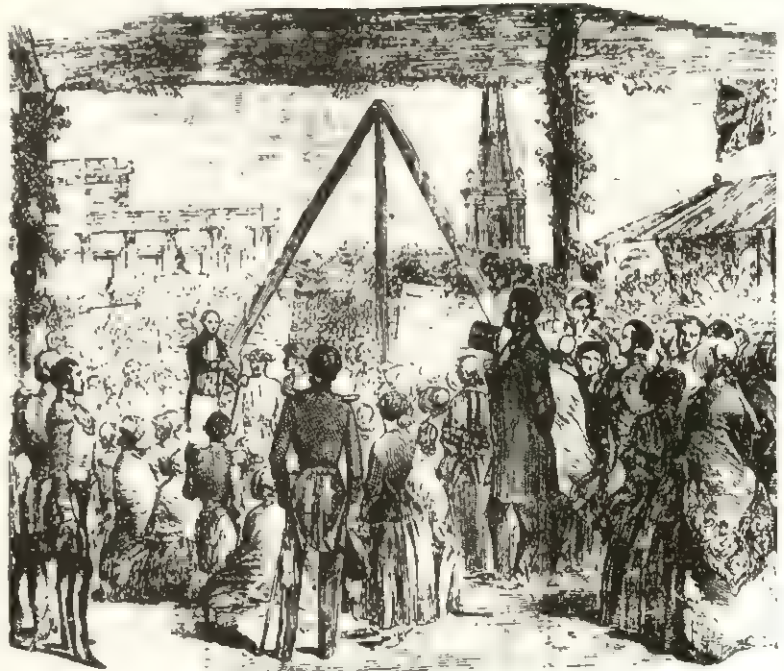
lial framework, make them better wives and mothers. Another motive, of course, was to remove the patently inhuman practices against women that seemed to symbolize the degradation of the whole society, specially in the eyes of the colonial rulers.

The entire process must be viewed in its historical context: the emergence of an urban Calcutta culture different from that of rural Bengal, and the growth of an English-educated professional middle class or *bhadralok*. The colonial power needed the *bhadralok*; they in turn needed their women to support their claims of arrival in a progressive, Europeanized society. The colonial connection determined the role-model of these educated women, imported from Victorian England – despite the fact that Victorian women were far from being liberated.

The women of Calcutta, grateful for their newly-acquired freedom and dignity, accepted the male-defined criteria. Hence the contemporary women's journals (echoing men's speeches and writings) repeatedly emphasize the nurturing role of women, the intellectual companionship and emotional support provided by a wife to her husband, and the difference between men's and women's natures. Even in the progressive *Bamabodhini Patrika* (founded in Calcutta in 1864), educated women declared almost unanimously that, beyond learning Bengali and perhaps some English, women should concentrate on the household

skills and aspire to become a good mother (*sumata*) and a good housewife (*sugrihini*).

Such compositions reinforced the home-oriented stereotype, in more 'educated' and 'progressive' form. This was borne out in practice as well. When Kadambini Ganguli went on her rounds, she would make lace while sitting in her carriage; and she seems to have been too anxious to please her relations by her first marriage. Such behaviour reveals the





Above :
4.4 Kadambini
Ganguli

Below :
4.5 Kumudini Basu

contradictions among the educated women of the time: the desire to enter the public world and yet to maintain the traditional norms.

The Twentieth Century Context

The Swadeshi movement in Bengal (1903-10) gave women the first socially approved entry into politics, so long a male preserve; the women of Calcutta took the lead. Later, Gandhi's special call to women removed for the first time the stigma of their inferiority, and the freedom movement created a novel situation in which many social restrictions and taboos disappeared. Moreover, the armed struggle or *biplabi* movement in Bengal infused a spirit of adventure into her women, while the Leftist ideology (which first made inroads in Calcutta in the 1930s) generated a contempt for traditional beliefs. In a more general way, the Second World War, particularly the evacuation of Calcutta (1941-42) after the bombing of Rangoon, the famine of 1943 and the riots of 1946 unsettled the old socio-economic structure and, with it, the inherited cultural framework. This helped to open new perspectives in the lives and thoughts of Calcutta's women. These are best viewed under three heads: the urge for education, participation in the world outside the home, and changes in domestic and family life.

The Urge for Education

When the daughters of middle-class families first began to acquire some education, either at home or at school, the primary motive was to make them more eligible as prospective brides: *bhadralok* men increasingly sought educated brides as useful helpmates in both their professional and their personal lives. But slowly, a new logic of female education began to gain ground.

Abala Basu (1868-1951), a leading educationist, argued in the *Modern Review* that women should have 'a deeper and extended' education, 'not because we may make better matches for our girls . . . not even that the services of the daughter-in-law may be more valuable in the home of her adoption, but because a woman like a man is first of all a mind, and only in the second place physical and a body'. The cue was taken by the author Kamini Ray (1864-1933) who, in an address delivered at a girls' school in Calcutta, declared that the aim of women's

education was to contribute to their all-round development and fulfilment of their potential.

The Brahmo women of Calcutta eagerly responded to this trend of thought, while the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 made it gradually possible for orthodox Hindu women to join their Brahmo sisters. Some of the women students even aspired to a career. Pushpamayee Basu (1908-86), a schoolteacher, reminisced in a personal interview: 'When I was a student, the main objective of most girls was to acquire a modicum of education which would help them to contract a suitable marriage. Later, when I was teaching, I found a number of girls planning in terms of gainful employment, particularly since the 1940s, possibly as an effect of the Second World War.'

A noteworthy development was the introduction of co-education in Calcutta at the college and vocational level. This offered women students an opportunity to meet their male counterparts on equal terms. At first, a sort of tacit purdah prevailed, and female students would enter the classroom only when their teacher did. This was gradually relaxed, and women participated in the corporate life of the college, especially in debates, drama and sports, on which the contemporary journal *Prabasi* published regular reports.

As female education spread and political consciousness grew, the traditional womanly ideals underwent significant change. A new set of values – individualism, personal ambition and achievement – began to replace the old virtues of mute self-sacrifice and silent backyard existence. The ideological conflict between the old school and the new is powerfully expressed in Kamini Ray's fictional debate between a grandmother and her granddaughter. The grandmother condemns the modern woman and strongly upholds the traditional role of wife and mother: women must not get involved in the sordid business of the outside world. In a spirited rebuttal, the granddaughter argues that in the ultimate analysis a woman is an individual, and as such free to seek fulfilment in her chosen field, whether at home or away from it.

Similar ideas were ventilated through other contemporary writings, which at once reflected and moulded attitudes. For instance, in 1931 a woman asserted in the journal *Jayashree*: 'The so-called feminine virtues have made women only women and not human.' Another woman

declared, 'In terms of brain-power, there is no difference between men and women. ... The artificial demarcation of their spheres is, therefore, totally illogical.'

Involvement in the Public World

It was in the twentieth century that large numbers of women in Calcutta first made their entry into the world beyond the four walls of their home. Previously, apart from one or two women like Swarnakumari Debi and Kadambini Ganguli (both of whom attended the Congress sessions in 1889 and 1890), women were barred from the male sphere of politics.

As I noted earlier, the Swadeshi Movement radically changed the situation. No doubt the call to women was given by men, and the women's response was made feasible by the male-led reforms of the previous century. Tradition operated in another way as well: the subtle transformation of a political and economic struggle into the worship of the motherland, puja or religion being the woman's prescribed sphere.

Of the women of Calcutta who took public part in the Swadeshi Movement, Sarala Debi Choudhuran stands head and shoulders above the rest. She was the first Bengali woman leader in our freedom struggle. Swarnakumari's daughter and Rabindranath's niece, this outstanding woman formed youth groups in *akhras* and *samitis* (which also served for liaison with the violent revolutionaries or *biplabis*), introduced the *Birashami Utsab* and *Udayaditya Utsab* where young men displayed their skill in sword and *lathi* (stick) play, and maintained a close contact with the Biplabi Suhrid Samiti ('Friends of the Biplabis'). She also started the 'Lakshmir Bhandar', a store for popularizing indigenous goods. Apart from Sarala Debi there were a number of women in Calcutta like Lilabati Mitra (1864-1924) who organized meetings and delivered speeches in support of Swadeshi and the boycott of British goods. The *Bamabodhini Patrika* reported: 'At several meetings women are coming forward to inspire men, while at home they are initiating their sons, brothers and husbands to the worship of the motherland.'

Although the Swadeshi Movement petered out by 1910, and the Partition of Bengal was annulled in 1911, women's interest in politics

persisted, if in a lower key, during the next decade. The election of Annie Besant as the first woman President of the Congress stimulated their political enthusiasm, especially because the 1917 Congress session where she presided was held in Calcutta. Here Indian women started agitating for franchise; in 1921, Calcutta saw the foundation of the Bangiya Nari Samaj to fight for women's suffrage, with Kumudini Mitra (Basu), Kamini Ray and Mrinalini Sen (1879-1972) as the most prominent leaders. Limited suffrage was granted to women in 1925, and in 1926 Bengali women exercised this right for the first time.

Later, Gandhi's emergence gave a great impetus to women's political involvement. Basanti Debi (1880-1974) stood beside her husband Chittaranjan Das in guiding the Non-cooperation Movement in Bengal. She led women's pickets at shops selling foreign goods, and was arrested in a Calcutta street for hawking khadi. Urmila Debi (1883-1956), who

4.6 Bimala first leaves the women's quarters with her husband : from Satyajit Ray's *Gharey Bairey*



4.7 *Bharat Mata*
(Mother India).
Abanindranath Thakur



was arrested with her, commented: 'We felt that the struggle had to be given some dynamism and involvement by women. We also set an example to the rest of the women; our arrest produced the desired effect.'

During Chittaranjan Das's imprisonment, Basanti Debi became President of the Bengal Provincial Congress and presided over its 1922 session at Chattagram, bringing a Calcutta woman to the country's frontline political leadership. Meanwhile Urmila Debi had organized the Nari Karma Mandir (1921) to spread the gospel of Swaraj; Hemaprabha Majumdar (1888-1962), one of the five founders of the Swarajya Party, organized the Mahila Karmi Sansad (1922) for giving vocational training to women as well as inspiring them with nationalism.

The highly charged political atmosphere of

the 1930s gave a new impetus to women's political activism. Organizations like the Ladies' Picketing Board (collaborating with the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee), the Nari Satyagrahi Samiti organized by Urmila Debi, and the Mahila Rashtriya Sangha, founded by Latika Ghosh (1902-87) with the help of Subhashchandra Basu, actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement. A few women like Bina Das (1911-86) joined the armed struggle; others like Jyotirmayi Ganguli (1889-1945) formed part of the political leadership; and masses of women, nameless and faceless, combined to strike at the British power. Women who would not normally appear before their male relations now walked in processions, braved lathi charges, picketed shops and courted imprisonment. At the climax in the 1940s the women of Calcutta, like their counterparts elsewhere in India, came forward in hundreds to join the Quit India Movement. In sum, Calcutta's women had become important actors on the political scene.

During the same decades, many women were drawn towards the Leftist ideology. Santoshkumari Gupta took an active part in organizing jute mill strikes in 1928 and 1929 and later became a rousing labour leader. Prabhabati Dasgupta (1892-1976) was prominent in the municipal scavengers' strike in 1928 in Calcutta and Haora, earning the epithet 'Dhangar Ma' (the sweepers' mother). Leftist women leaders like Manikuntala Sen (1910-87) organized the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti in 1943 to uphold the cause of women and children in the war years. These leaders took an active role in the widespread strikes and agitations of the 1940s (like the fierce agitation against the INA Trial in 1945), violating all traditional womanly norms.

It is therefore a questionable though common claim that women's political participation was merely an extension of their domestic role, especially as such patriotism was subsumed within the context of *desh-puja*. The important fact is that women did step out of their homes into the hitherto exclusive male preserve of politics and power, and this had an inevitable impact on their world. Significantly, women leaders of Calcutta like Sarala Debi Choudhurani or Renuka Ray (1904-) at once strove for political freedom and the social elevation of women.

Social Organizations

As the freedom movement progressed, there emerged in Calcutta, *pari passu*, a number of women's voluntary associations. The first major one, with an all-India character, was the Bharat Stree Mahamandal (1910) organized by Sarala Debi Choudhurani with the purpose of uniting and educating women. Naturally, their struggle was chiefly directed against child marriage and the purdah system. The Bengal branch, located in Calcutta, was looked after for many years by Krishnabhamini Das (1864-1919), a remarkable woman who went from door to door to win women to her cause.

Other organizations followed. The Nari Shiksha Samiti, based in Calcutta, was founded by Abala Basu in 1915. Its principal aim was to establish primary schools, prepare suitable text books, and open maternity and child welfare centres. In its first years, it launched several schools in Calcutta, including the still existing Muralidhar College for Girls; but from 1921 it shifted its focus to backward villages. The Samiti also started the Vidyasagar Bani Bhaban for training widows as teachers, and the Mahila Shilpa Bhaban for instructing women in home-based arts and crafts.

Another women's organization in Calcutta, the Sarojnalini Memorial Association, was started by Gurusaday Datta in 1925 but quickly taken over by women leaders like Kumudini Mitra, Hemlata Thakur (1873-1967) and Latika Ghosh. Their fields of activity were adult

education, public hygiene, mothercare and industrial training for women. The organ of the Association, *Bangalakshmi*, became one of the most significant women's journals of the time.

The Bengal Women's Education League (1928), the outcome of the Bengal Women's Educational Conference held in Calcutta in 1927, kept itself confined to the educational sphere. The All Bengal Women's Union (1932), on the contrary, fought social discrimination against the sex, and especially the immoral traffic in women. It set up rescue homes for abducted and molested women, and marked perhaps 'the first independent and conscious efforts of Indian women to help their more unfortunate sisters'.

The most important such organization was, however, the All India Women's Conference, formed in 1927 under the leadership of Margaret Cousins but soon run completely by Indian women. It had a very effective Bengal branch, with its centre at Calcutta, under capable leaders like Sarala Ray, Renuka Ray, Phulrenu Guha and Ashoka Gupta.

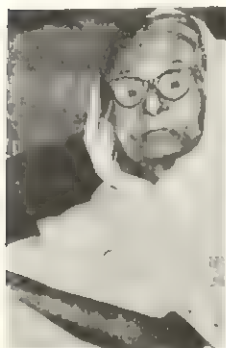
All these organizations were limited by their middle-class character, despite some significant rural work. It is doubtful whether they ever genuinely touched the lives of the vast majority of Indian women, especially those in the countryside. Yet viewed historically, their efforts had a threefold impact.

First, they placed the leadership of women's movements in the women's own hands. As one



Left
4.8 Abala Basu

Right
4.9 Sarala Debi
Choudhurani



4.10 Basanti Debi

woman expressed it in *Bangalakshmi*, 'It is women, not men, who must carry the call of awakening to the door of every woman.' Another wrote even more sharply: 'If a woman does not think about women, who will? A husband? A son? Those days are gone.' This was the genesis of woman-bonding, the alliance between women *qua* women outside the bounds of the family, which is the vital constituent of woman-power.

Second, these associations clearly rejected the Victorian/Anglo-Saxon stereotype of womanhood. A successful or capable Western woman may be held up as an example; but the point of reference was the indigenous mother-goddess, woman symbolizing *Shakti*, and the projected ideal was the Indian woman sage of the Vedic Age, held in high esteem.

Third, these associations furnished women with the opportunity and rationale for stepping out into the wider world, even if they were not freedom fighters. Given the contemporary social framework, the members of the various bodies – ordinary housewives most of them – showed great initiative and self-will in carrying out their tasks, which often demanded travelling and dealing with strangers.

It was also during this period that Calcutta women began to develop the logic of gainful employment for women, practically unknown in the nineteenth century. This entry to the greater world had, however, its most profound repercussions in the home.

The Domestic World

Some of the women's journals propagated the idea of 'economic equality' between husband and wife, and how a woman must strive for economic independence if she were not to be totally reliant on her kinsmen. But it was only after the Second World War that women took up gainful employment on any scale, for the most pressing of reasons: to balance the family

budget. The accompanying table indicates the inflationary spiral in Calcutta during and after the War: nearly a 300 per cent rise in eight years.

Under such economic compulsion, women – particularly in families with no adult or able males – increasingly began to work: as stenographers, telephone operators, in the Food Rationing Department and so on. Their money-power gave them some status and decision-making authority within the family. However, they now had a double burden of domestic chores plus the new workload, especially as the culturally-determined attitude of Indian men did not induce sharing of domestic duties.

Not unnaturally, the stress suffered by working women often gave rise to resentment and, following from this, to a critical appraisal of the old familial balance of power. The working woman insisted more and more on mutual conjugal obligations, and preferred to live away from joint-family households. A nuclear family offered more authority to a married woman, and more intimate relations with her husband than a joint family would allow.

For though marriage remained the most important event in a woman's life-cycle, her ideas about marriage had begun to depart from the age-old norms. The raising of the marriage age, linked with education, enabled them to formulate their own concepts about marriage and husbands. The author Lila Majumdar (1908-) tells us in her autobiography how, from their high school days, young women in Calcutta avidly read the new genre of Bengali romantic literature composed by Saratchandra Chatterji, Buddhadeb Basu and others. These works, as well as the short stories and poems in journals like *Kallol*, idealized a mutual attraction between men and women. Young readers developed a (perhaps untenable)

Table 1 The Middle Class Cost of Living Index Number for Calcutta, August 1939 – August 1947

Period	Food	Fuel & Lighting	Clothing	Miscellaneous	Combined Index
August 1939	100	100	100	100	100
August 1943	335	229	377	128	274
August 1947	350	218	320	186	292

romanticism, and women sought in their husbands a lover and a friend. They demanded consideration and fidelity, if not precisely equal status. The husband was viewed as a partner and friend, rather than a god as prescribed in the *Shastras*.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the bond between husband and wife took on newer and stronger meaning. In a well-known essay, *Kalikatar Streesamaj* ('Female Society in Calcutta'), Sharatkumari Choudhurani (1861-1920) pointed out as early as the 1890s that young women in Calcutta discussed their husbands rather than their mothers-in-law: 'How is your husband? Does he love you?' This trend was reinforced in the twentieth century. A husband and his wife might work together. Indira Debi Choudhurani (1873-1960) and her husband Pramatha Choudhuri jointly looked after the famous journal *Sabujpatra*; Radharani Debi (1903-89) and Narendra Deb were a well-known literary couple; Chittaranjan Das and Basanti Debi worked together in the freedom struggle.

Simultaneously, women grew more aware of their rights *vis-à-vis* their husbands. For the first time we hear of women demanding that a husband should do his duty by his wife as she did hers by him. 'In conjugal relations, why should a woman get less than a man?' Protests mounted against polygamy and wife-desertion. The *Bamabodhini Patrika* carried a real-life story, poignantly told, of a man taking a second wife because of the plain looks of the first. A fictional sequel appeared promptly in the same journal, where a woman left her husband because he had behaved in this way: 'I am not prepared to share my husband, and so, in spite

of my love for him, I leave him.' The logic of the argument induced women to challenge the double standard of morality, and insist on married chastity for both partners.

Shanta Debi (1893-1984) has a striking short story. A young wife returns after a few days' absence to find her husband's mistress comfortably settled in the bedroom. She wipes off her *sindur*, the vermilion mark of marriage, and leaves. When her sister-in-law accuses her of dishonouring her husband, she replies: 'When did I even have a husband?'

In practice, of course, most aggrieved women would not venture to leave their husbands, owing to economic insecurity and traditional restrictions. Nevertheless, departures were not altogether unknown. The view increasingly gained ground that a woman should have the right to write off an unfair or undesirable alliance. It was also argued that while a stable home was a child's ideal milieu, it was in the child's own interest for the parents to separate in case of incompatibility or infidelity. Essays or stories written by women in vanguard journals do not prove general acceptance of such ideas; but they indicate the emergence of a line of thought which served as a basis for future progress and, most importantly, for legislation in independent India.

No radical revolutions were made, but many new trends were set in motion; if their reach was too narrow, it would await broadening in the future. If an alternative model of society free from gender inequality was not formulated, the task was bequeathed to new generations of women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.



4.11 Lila Majumdar

WOMEN IN CALCUTTA : AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Jasodhara Bagchi

Twenty-seven years after political independence, the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India came to the conclusion that the majority of women are still very far from enjoying the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them by the Constitution. Society has not yet succeeded in framing the required norms or institutions to enable women to fulfil the multiple roles that they are expected to play in India today.

Fifteen more years have gone by, but the conclusions remain valid even in a city like Calcutta, once the site of the Bengal Renaissance, the city which nursed the early years of the Indian National Congress as well as of the IPTA, the most significant left-wing cultural movement in India. How does one come to terms with such contradictions in our national life? A bird's-eye view of the conditions of women in Calcutta since 1947 takes us to the heart of these multiple contradictions. The women of Calcutta have operated between the dual pulls of marginalization and empowerment.

1947 saw an unprecedented acceleration of earlier trends. The purdah that had confined the Bengali *bhadramahila* to her *antahpur* (private quarters) had already been shaken in the first four decades of this century. It was nearly swept away, not so much by political independence as through its bitter gift of Partition, which divided Bengal along communal lines.

As in most social upheavals, it was the women who bore the main brunt of displacement, carrying the burden of day-to-day living, often on the platforms of Shealdah station where trainloads of women arrived with their children and menfolk from the distant parts of East Bengal. Shanti Mitra's short story *Samabedana* ('Sympathy') captures such a situation.

Thousands of women were uprooted from their ancestral homes. Barely four years after the man-made famine of 1943, Calcutta again witnessed the degrading spectacle of families trying to survive on the streets and railway platforms. In a memorable scene in Nimai Ghosh's *Chhinnamul*, one of the earliest *nouvelle vague* films in Bengal, an old woman in an East Bengal village made her protest, clutching to the bamboo pole of her home and insisting 'I will not go'. Hers was the voice of Bengali womanhood saying 'no' to the wrench of the man-made partition of their homeland.

The same stroke that brought this flood of uprooted marginalized women to Calcutta also opened the door to many new opportunities for Bengali middle-class Hindu women. They came out of the private domain of domesticity and child-rearing to take up public duties. The lives of women in Calcutta entered a new phase of complexity. The Constitution guaranteed equality of opportunities and the women seized this right, however feebly at first. Their journey was not smooth. Caught between the



private and the public worlds, the women underwent conflicts of unforeseen dimension. The working woman emerged as a subject of representation in fiction and the cinema: Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* (based on Narendranath Mitra's story) and Ritwick Ghatak's *Meghey Dhaka Tara* are the two best-known films on the subject. The role conflicts of working women also gained popularity as a subject for sociologists.

Women and Work

It was mainly economic need that forced women in Calcutta to make the transition from the home to the world. But even a temporary respite from household chores spelt freedom for women; moreover, it gave them command over money which they could claim as their own. This did not, however, ensure the emancipation from the reproductive sphere through participation in social production that Engels had talked about. On the contrary, it brought on the slavery of 'double day work', specially for the less privileged among the working women. The elaborate ideals of *grihasthali*, the nitty-gritty of domesticity, were inculcated as part of the colonized community's response to the alien presence of the British. Bengali women could not shake them off instantly. Work outside home was not part of their socialization process, and it often added to the burden of their lives.

The question of the 'respectability' of women's work also operated strongly. The *bhadralok* culture tried to keep alive the *bhadra-mahila* as part of the machinery of patriarchal control even when the economic basis of the family structure became shaky. The roots of this unease go back much earlier. In a section on 'Attitudes to the participation of women in public life' in the 1931 Census Report, the respondents showed their discomfort:

in the absence of a tradition behind them, women engaging in public life will find themselves subjected to temptations which they have had no preparation to resist.

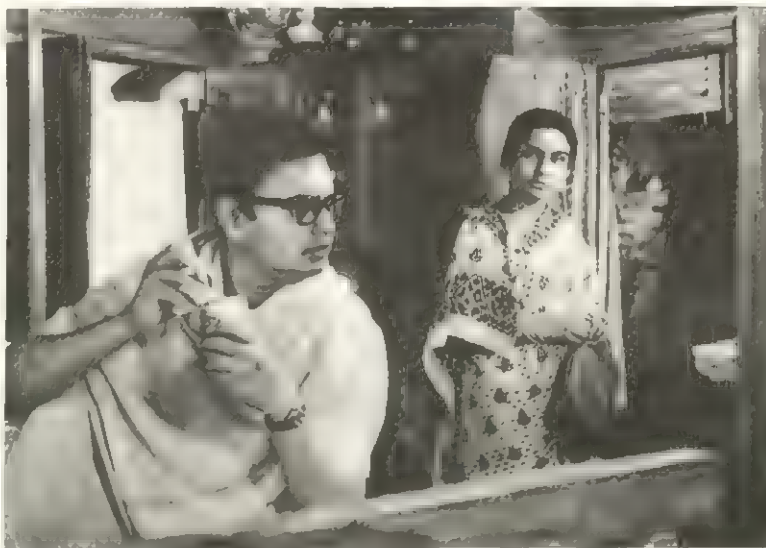
Some went even further to reiterate gender subordination as the basis of Calcutta's social life :

We feel that women's proper place is in the home and that she is unsuited by reason of her sex, temperament, and physical structure to plunge into the

rough and tumble of public life.

Ironically, the decline of the city's economy has made for greater visibility of women in public life. In the colonial city, working women mostly signified prostitutes who were often also performing artists, or else domestic servants, commonly living as inmates in rich men's households. This was altered slowly at first but drastically after 1947. Calcutta was no longer a city of the male elite in which women 'also ran'. The overwhelming presence of uprooted marginalized women workers in the 'unorganized sector' has lent a new gravity to the problem of women's work in Calcutta.

Most of these women live in the slums along the margins of the city. According to the 1981 Census the Calcutta municipal area had 1,015 slums with a population of 1.67 million. They covered an area of some 60 square kilometres with few paved roads, little electricity and virtually no private sanitary facilities. Dickens's



Tom All Alone's is a living reality in Calcutta even today. But despite the efforts of successive bodies such as the CIT, CMPO and CMDA, Calcutta has found neither an effective Sanitation Report nor a worthy Charles Dickens. The lumpen male elements living in the margins of the city, who have swelled the ranks of the urban unemployed or semi-employed, have often survived because their womenfolk have not hesitated to take up any employment whatsoever.

The women workers of the 'unorganized sector' have been studied in depth over a number of years, by Nirmala Banerji and Bela

5.1 Arati prepares to go to work much to her husband's annoyance : from Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar*

5.2 Market women
in Calcutta



Banerji for instance. We have obtained much insight into these 'neglected' areas of women's work. Given the fact that the female workforce participation rates have been habitually low in Bengal, and that it has declined dramatically between 1911 and 1961, Nirmala Banerji observes :

Recent trends show that in the urban areas, women's employment is increasing at a significant rate in an otherwise stagnant labour market. It is evident that women as a group accept wage rates and working conditions inferior to those of other workers. These two facts taken together imply that women's employment is increasing at the cost of male employment and the relation between male and female employment is no longer complementary but competitive. Women in the urban economy are working largely outside their household occupations and their wages form an important part of the total family income. (*Women Workers in the Unorganized Sector*, 1985, p. 24)

Has this, however, improved the status of women in Calcutta? For most workers of the

unorganized sector, living below the poverty line, with no access to minimum civic facilities, work takes the guise of a distress measure and is not translated into an appreciable sense of independence or improved status. Exploitation often takes a grim patriarchal form: the poorer the family, the more work the woman undertakes to reach the minimum target level of family income, yet the less help she is likely to get in household work except from her minor female children. This is specially true of domestic servants and piece-rate workers. Few can even conceive of an improved condition of life for their daughters. I once asked a commuting woman, who carried rice illegally into the city for sale in the urban market, about her young daughter's future: would she be going to school? The woman looked surprised. Of course the child would take up the same work, smuggle rice into the city. Harassment by the police was obviously not enough of a deterrent.

In the lives of these women with hardly any skill or education, no prospect of being protected by any labour legislation, work brought little or no social status; self-employment was a euphemism for constant uncertainty and vulnerability. Treating of the extreme hardships of poor women working under abject conditions, mostly caused by acute male unemployment, Kalyani Karlekar talks about 'planning towards a unisex work-a-day world' :

The first requisite for such a community would be institutions for taking the bother off home life. These would not only liberate women in the true sense of the word but create employment. Men will then rush for posts of cooks, cleaners, launderers and tailors for doing such work as institutionally as they have shunned domestically. (*Role and Status of Women in Indian Society*, 1978, p. 92).

Sex ratio

The four successive Census reports covering the period under survey show an upward trend in the sex ratio of the urban population. (See Table 1.) The migration of entire families from East Pakistan, however traumatic a process, definitely helped to reduce the gap. It appears to be highest between the ages of 15 and 59, perhaps partly owing to the influx of male migrant labour. This, one may note, is also the most vulnerable age for women, when repeated childbearing and double-day work under gruelling conditions break the backs of strug-



TABLE 1 Males and Females in the Calcutta Municipal Corporation Area 1951-81

	No. of wards	Area (in sq. km)	No. of males	No. of females	Total population	Ratio of (4) to (5)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1951	32	83.71	1,623,211	925,466	2,548,677	0.36
1961	80	95.62	1,805,383	1,109,029	2,914,412	0.38
1971	100	98.79	1,924,505	1,224,241	3,148,746	0.39
1981	100	104.0	1,930,320	1,374,686	3,305,006	0.42

Source: Census Reports

gling women on the margins of city life. Table 1 shows the slow upward trend of the male-female sex ratio in the Calcutta Municipal area.

Literacy and education

The opening of a number of new schools and colleges, as well as two new universities, in Calcutta meant wider spread of higher education among women. The most spectacular victory was the opening of the gates of Presidency College, the most formidable male citadel of higher learning in colonial times, to girl students of post-Independence Calcutta (actually from 1944). Women aspiring to higher education had another boost in 1955 when Jadabpur University came into being in the southern reaches of Calcutta, catering to the needs of the rising professional middle class, who tended to concentrate in south Calcutta. A number of co-educational schools came up in the same area, overcoming the bar against women being trained in science and mathematics. Women made their first major entry into the field of technology at Jadabpur University.

The grim reality of the slow and uneven spread of female literacy in Calcutta offers a contrast to the new avenues opening up for elite women in Calcutta. For a metropolitan city, Calcutta has a shamefully low rate of literacy among the male as well as the female population. Table 2 shows the slow upward climb of the male and female literacy rates within the Calcutta municipal area. What is striking in the 1951 figures is that the percentage of male and female literacy remains the same at 30 per cent for *basic* literacy but diverges more sharply in the total. Between 1951 and 1961 there is a substantial reduction in the gap between male and female levels of literacy; this is only marginally bettered

between 1961 and 1971, which may be called the lost decade for literacy in Calcutta.

Looking at the ward-wise distribution of male and female illiteracy in 1961, one notices how uneven the spread is throughout Calcutta. In virtually all the wards, the male and female literacy rates go up or down together, but there are some anomalous cases in which the male literacy is higher than average, but the female literacy rate dips below the average. The presence of a number of high-powered intellectuals among the women of Calcutta, with distinguished degrees and research records – one of them has even conquered Antarctica – amply proves that women have done very well in the field of higher studies. But these privileged few have not been able to drag their

5.3 Woman
domestic servant



TABLE 2 Literacy Rates, Calcutta Municipal Corporation area: 1951-1981

	No. of Males		No. of Females		Literacy rate (per cent)	
	Total	Literate	Total	Literate	Male	Female
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1951	1,623,211	952,154	925,466	401,185	59	43
1961	1,805,383	1,154,012	1,109,029	581,443	64	52
1971	1,924,505	1,233,257	1,224,241	665,988	64	54
1981	1,930,320	1,418,245	1,374,686	866,247	73	63

5.4 Muslim girls at school

(b) Sources: Census Reports.



toiling sister anywhere near a human level of education. An all-out drive is needed to raise the status of such women. Are the middle-class women ready for the fray?

Culture and Media

The Nationalist struggle, that had so hit the lives of the women of this city, gave way to new public challenges that called for different responses. The most striking achievement was in the domain of culture, triggering off a new self-perception in the Bengali middle class. The life cycle of a typical Bengali middle-class woman, captured so evocatively in Manisha Ray's anthropological study *Bengali Women* (1975), gives us the statics; the dynamics of Bengali women's struggle to make their presence visible has to be read in the field of cultural expression.

Theatre

There are artists with whose lives the culture of a particular period gets so intimately linked that they become symbols of that cultural life in its wider connotation. In the field of acting, Tripti Mitra was such a personality who became a culture symbol of the decades of the forties and fifties. (Translated from Dhruba Gupta in *Chitrabhas* 1989)

The empowerment of women through the political culture of the years around Independence was realized in Tripti Mitra (1925-89), who bridged the cultural fervour of the IPTA movement of the forties and the New Drama Movement (*Naba Natya Andolan*) that swept the cultural life of Calcutta after the 'Bahurupee' troupe came into being in 1948. Tripti Mitra, who made her debut in *Chhenra*

Tar and *Nabanna* of the earlier movement, dominated the theatre of Calcutta for well over thirty years with her charismatic personality. Her portrayal of Nandini in Rabindranath Thakur's *Raktakarabi*, a role for which Rabindranath himself did not find anyone satisfactory, put the new Bengali theatre movement on the map of India.

Shobha Sen (1923-), the other powerful actress in the IPTA, teamed up with Utpal Datta to form the People's Little Theatre (PLT), the more radical wing of the Naba Natya Andolan. Tripti Mitra's daughter Shaonli Mitra now grips the Calcutta audience with her versatile feminist rendering of the *Mahabharata* seen through the eyes of the grievously wronged Draupadi. The Naba Natya Andolan brought into prominence intellectual actresses like Keya Chakrabarti and Kajal Choudhuri. Theatre was no longer taboo for women. Many women of Calcutta today take up theatre as a part-time occupation, using it as a channel of self-expression as well as additional income.

Cinema

The New Indian Cinema was born in Calcutta in the early fifties through the efforts of Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak. The cinematic visions of both Satyajit and Ritwik are permeated by varied female presences. Women, mostly from the educated middle class, came forward to give shape to the conceptions of these two great artists. Karuna Banerji, as the struggling mother in the first two films of the *Apu* trilogy, went a long way in defining the nuanced humanism of Satyajit Ray. Supriya Choudhuri as Nita in Ritwik's masterpiece *Meghey Dhaka Tara* has clinched, for millions of viewers all over the world, both a mythical presence and the realistic portrayal of a struggling girl from a refugee family in post-Independence Bengal. Madhabi Chakrabarti has done both the cineastes proud, portraying the old-style femininity in *Charulata* and the new in *Mahanagar* under Satyajit Ray, as well as the ravaged woman in Ritwik's *Subarnarekha*. *Mahanagar* was the first film to expose the uneasiness of the Bengali middle class with the phenomenon of the working wife.

The presence of these new women, suggesting new possibilities of self-perception, also found its echo in the commercial cinema.

Sunanda Banerji, Anubha Gupta, Manju Dey and Kaberi Basu brought a new intelligence to bear upon their professional art. The New Indian Cinema also brought out new power among younger women such as Aparna Sen, Shreela Majumdar or Mamata Shankar. The confident professionalism of these women is brought out to the full by Aparna Sen, who has herself made two films, *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *Parama* – both, interestingly, centred on individual women. There is no doubt that the power of the New Indian Cinema has defined the women of this city for sensitive viewers all over the world. But even while Bengali women were making such conquests, the average

5.5 Tripti Mitra in *Bahurupée's* Raja



5.6 Aparna Sen
directing *Parama*



Bengali film continued its degrading portrayal of women as self-sacrificing victims.

Literature

Analysing the changing attitudes towards women writers and the woman's self-image, Nabanita Deb Sen has looked back nostalgically to the days when it was enough to be a woman writer to be accepted for publication. The women writers of the earlier era who wrote from within the *antahpur* were not professional writers entering the literary market. They were self-taught committed writers who fought their battles for autonomy by taking up positions *vis-à-vis* the Nationalist struggle. Some of the most important of these writers lived well into the post-Independence period. Jyotirmayi Debi (1894-1988) and Giribala Debi (1891-1983) lived to be felicitated in Calcutta in the International Women's Year, 1975, when new editions of their writings were brought out. Predictably, the mother-daughter relationship was fruitful in this particular case, for the initiative was taken by Bani Ray, Giribala's daughter and herself a noted writer who has experimented with feminism in form and content. She was ably assisted by Ashoka

Gupta, Jyotirmayi's daughter and an activist for women's rights in the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC). Nabanita Deb Sen, herself an author, brought out an excellent edition of the poems that her mother Radharani Debi (1903-89) wrote under the pseudonym Aparajita Debi. A slightly younger contemporary of Radharani Debi, Ashapurna Debi (1909-) bridges the gap between the older and the younger generations, winning wide acclaim by continuing to write about the intimate conflicts in the lives of women within the family and their struggle for independence within a patriarchal society.

By way of contrast, the contemporary women writers come from the mainstream of higher education and are highly professional. Many of them even belong to institutions of higher learning. Mahashweta Debi, whose pen took fire in the seventies against the state repression directed towards rebel groups – whether from the urban middle class, peasants or tribals – gave up a teaching job in a college to take up full-time writing. Nabanita Deb Sen combines her writing with the teaching of Comparative Literature. An interesting case is that of Malini Bhattacharya, whose involve-



ment with left-wing politics and the woman's movement has resulted in a number of plays that place women's oppression in its ideological and socio-cultural perspective: *Meye Diley Shajiye*, *Eta Rakta Kena*, *Bandar Khela* and *Deoralar Agey*. Generally, however, women writers today concentrate on sharpening their purely professional competence. We now have a number of young poets and story-writers who try to make their authentic women's voice audible.

Organizations

The International Women's Decade saw the establishment of new types of women's organizations in Calcutta. A city riddled with social problems and a massive influx of refugees after Partition naturally had a number of very energetic welfare organizations such as the Sarojinalini Datta Memorial Association, the Nari Seba Sangha and the All Bengal Women's Union Home. The AIWC and Women's Coordinating Council have also catered to women's needs. But there appears to have been a qualitative leap after the publication of the Report on the Status of Women in 1974 followed by the various debates, discussions and struggles thrown up by the International Women's Decade. In Calcutta several groups came up in the eighties to study and to intervene actively in social discrimination against women, in the field of development as also the entire ideological apparatus such as law, institutions of learning and the media. Many of these groups bring out publications such as *Sachetana*, *Pratibidhan* or *Sabala*. For a number of years the different groups combined to open a stall called *Ajker Nari* ('Today's Woman') in the Calcutta Book Fair. Within the



mainstream newsprint media, women journalists are making their presence felt in Calcutta through daring investigative journalism. 5.7 Women political workers

The women of Calcutta are determined to be visible in every walk of life, despite the extreme deprivation many of them suffer. Whether visibility has ensured empowerment is a question that troubles many of us. In a difficult city like Calcutta, the heroism of the working women increases day by day. She is no longer the Devi to be worshipped on a pedestal, nor a woman who habitually walks behind men. Like Rabindranath's Chitrangada, she keeps abreast of the men in crises and struggles. She goes even further: she breasts the storm alone whether in professional institutions, factories or sweatshops. A new woman is raising her head.

THE DEMOGRAPHY OF CALCUTTA

Ambikaprasad Ghosh

Assisted by Kaushik Chatterjee

This article gives a brief survey of the demographic situation in Calcutta, particularly in the decades immediately before and after Independence. Since the demography of a city involves its total evolution and composition – the people who live in it, work in it and eventually pass on their heritage to their progeny in better or worse state – even this limited canvas gives us some important insights.

Population Growth Rate, 1921-81.

Metropolitan cities are defined as those with a population over a million. In India, Calcutta entered this category (along with Bombay) way back in 1921 – or, making adjustments to take

the subsequent Calcutta municipal area into account, already in 1911. Table 1 gives the population figures for the Calcutta Municipal Corporation area (CMC); the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration (CUA), the collection of towns centred upon Calcutta along both banks of the Hugli; and the Calcutta Metropolitan District (CMD), or the entire region – with a rural as well as an urban component – constituting the 'Standard Urban Area' of Calcutta. Over the last six decades, the population of the CUA seems to have increased nearly five times, and that of the CMD four and a half times. The population of the city proper or CMC area has increased more slowly, especially since 1951.

The CMC area – 'inner' or 'proper' Calcutta

TABLE 1 Population of CMC Area, CUA and CMD from 1911 to 1981, Adjusted for Boundaries (in millions)

Year	CMC	CUA	CMD
1911	1.02	1.75	?
1921	1.05	1.89	2.25
1931	1.17	2.14	2.54
1941	2.17	3.62	4.31
1951	2.70	4.67	5.08
1961	2.93	5.98	6.62
1971	3.15	7.42	8.30
1981	3.30	9.19	10.11

TABLE 2 Population Growth Rate in CMC Area, CUA and CMD by Percentage

Decade	CMC	CUA	CMD
1911-20	3.63	7.99	?
1921-30	10.63	13.48	12.89
1931-40	86.00	69.34	69.69
1941-50	24.50	28.94	17.63
1951-60	8.48	28.14	30.57
1961-70	7.57	24.01	25.38
1971-80	4.96	23.90	21.81



— is thus increasingly becoming only the centre of a much larger circle extending over much of the districts of Haora, Hugli and North and South 24-Parganas as well as a part of Nadia. This whole area depends on the city for its economic life. The economic life of the CMC area is inseparable from that of the CUA and the CMD. There is a large flow of population, in and out, between the centre of the circle and the periphery.

However, the growth rate of the population has never been uniform. This may be seen in Table 2. The period 1931-50 saw the largest decadal growth in population, induced by war, Partition and post-Independence expansion. Since then, population growth in the CUA has slowed down. On the whole, this need not be a sign of decay but of a new, more even pattern of dispersal of urban and industrial growth all over India. It may be assumed that with such dispersal, Calcutta will take up a more balanced role in future economic development.

This is further indicated by the fact that the percentage of migrants from outside the CUA in the city's total population has been steadily declining since the 1950s, as seen in Table 3.

The figures reinforce the conclusion that the explosive expansion of Calcutta has, for the time being, slowed down, though a third of the population still consists of fresh migrants. In Bombay too, the rate of migration into the city seems to be slowing down. This trend is to be considered a sign of maturity rather than decay, as no urban agglomeration can have a continuously high rate of growth. It gradually settles down, unless something extraordinary disturbs its life. This slowing down is due to a state of saturation: the economic advantages of life in the agglomeration are gradually eroded,

and the advantages of scale outweighed by the growing diseconomies of overcrowding.

Even so, the natural growth rate of the CUA is still quite considerable. Even if the flow of migrants does not increase, the natural growth rate (as seen below) will keep the population growing steadily, though not at a breakneck pace as in the years up to 1960. More and more since 1961, the population of the CUA is increasing by its own momentum.

The tendency of the population to settle down is also seen in a higher female sex ratio as given in Table 4. The narrowing of the gap between the sexes over the decades shows that more and more, the city is being viewed as a place to both work and live in, rather than just as a place of work in order to maintain one's family elsewhere. It is certainly a healthy tendency to have complete families living a more balanced social and economic life within the city. But it raises the problem of the city's deficiencies as a living place for complete families. The problem has to be solved by developing social and cultural facilities along with the physical amenities for family life.

Table 5 shows the changing distribution of the population by age and sex between 1961 and 1981. This will afford an even more complete picture of the socio-biological evolution of the city. As regards both age and sex, the cross-sectional distribution is becoming more balanced. The earlier artificial preponderance of adult males recalled a mining town rather than a metropolitan region.

From a social angle, then, the population of the metropolis is stabilizing in a desirable manner. Let us now see what is happening to its economic life.



TABLE 3 Migrant Flow in the CUA by Volume and as Percentage of Total Population

Year	Migrant flow (in lakhs)	Percentage of migrants in total population
1921	8.85	45.9
1931	8.97	40.8
1941	14.07	42.3
1951	27.48	56.2
1961	34.39	52.9
1971	35.89	45.1
1981	30.04	31.3

TABLE 4 Sex Ratios between 1921 and 1981 in the CMC Area and the CUA (Females per 1,000 males)

Year	CMC Area	CUA
1921	487	515
1931	472	506
1941	456	495
1951	580	605
1961	612	655
1971	636	704
1981	712	781

TABLE 5 Sex and Age Composition
(by Percentage) of the Calcutta
Urban Agglomeration, 1961-81

Age-group	Persons	Male	Female
1961			
0-14	33.31	17.29	16.02
15-59	62.24	40.43	21.81
60 and above	4.45	2.30	2.15
Total	100.00	60.02	39.98
1971			
0-14	32.82	17.31	15.51
15-59	62.22	38.89	23.33
60 and above	4.96	2.68	2.28
Total	100.00	58.88	41.12
1981			
0-14	29.92	15.53	14.39
15-59	64.24	37.48	26.76
60 and above	5.84	3.13	2.71
Total	100.00	56.14	43.86

Urban Economic Activity

We may start with the participation rate in the metropolis – i.e., the proportion of population gainfully occupied to maintain the rest as their dependents.

The figures for the Calcutta and Bombay regions (Table 6) show a declining participation rate in both. To start with, both Bombay and Calcutta had high participation rates reflecting the preponderance of adult males in the population. Gradually, the participation rates in both regions have declined, in line with a more balanced age and sex composition of the population. This also accords with our earlier conclusion that the city is becoming more and more a place where whole families, including non-earning dependents, live out their lives. The proportion of the population engaged in

TABLE 6 Participation Rate in Percentages

Year	Calcutta	Bombay
1921	63.1	52.0
1931	62.4	40.0
1951	52.1	38.1
1961	38.5	40.4
1971	32.9	36.8
1981	30.5	N.A

economic activities is therefore bound to decline.

This is reflected also in the changing occupational structure of the metropolis. The officially recorded employment figures for metropolitan cities, and especially for Calcutta, do not properly reflect the active work force. There is a huge unrecorded reservoir of workers in various occupations; even granted very low productivity, their sheer number makes for a significant contribution to the total useful activity in the metropolis.

Table 7 gives the break-up between industrial and non-industrial workers, and their proportion to each other and to the total population, in 1961, 1971 and 1981. We should allow for quite a wide margin of error, as the Census enumeration does not separate the casually employed and the informally employed.

A somewhat more detailed break-up from 1921 onwards appears in Table 8. Even here, the highly aggregated classification makes it difficult to pinpoint the nature of the change; but it seems that employment in transport as

TABLE 7 Distribution of Gainfully
Employed Population in the
CUA by Industrial Composition
and as Percentage of
Total Population

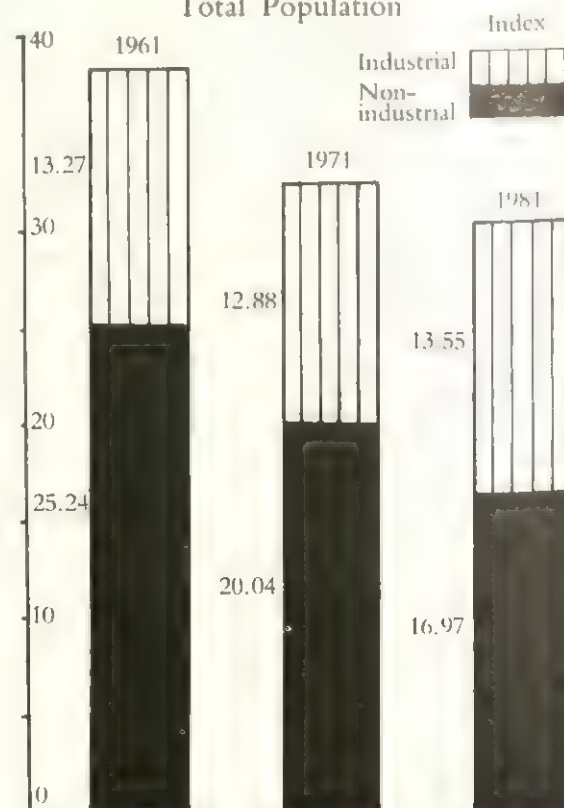


TABLE 8 Occupational Patterns in the CUA by Percentage in Successive Census Periods

	1921	1931	1951	1961	1971	1981
Household and non-household industries including manufacturing, processing	25.4	19.5	38.0	37.6	39.1	44.4
Transport and communication	10.3	8.9	12.3	10.0	11.6	10.3
Trade and commerce	16.6	15.9	21.8	21.7	18.5	21.4
Other services	43.4	52.6	27.4	30.6	29.9	21.8
Agriculture and exploitation of minerals	4.3	3.1	0.5	0.1	1.0	2.1

well as in trade and commerce have remained fairly steady since 1951, while that in other services has declined. Both household and non-household industries have expanded at their expense.

One possible explanation might lie in a move away from domestic and personal service to small processing and manufacturing activities on a household scale. This points to the fact that the material needs of the city, though not adequately met by large-scale modern industry, are being supplied by a labour-intensive household type of production. The proportion of workers in registered factories in modern large-scale industry seems to have stagnated; but since the demands of the population have expanded with growth in numbers, small-scale labour-intensive units have met this need, possibly with an inferior quality of output. For instance, the inadequacy of the power sector has stimulated a rise in small, highly labour-intensive industries manufacturing lanterns, candles etc. Similarly, while the organized press and publicity sector has suffered, small unregistered printing presses have come up to meet the gap in many cases. Rickshaws have multiplied to supplement the over-congested bus service.

Non-registered and Informal Employment

In most developing countries, the volume of industrial employment in registered concerns is small. The only recorded figures of employment relate to this; but the unorganized informal sector constitutes a substantial element in the total employment scene. Table 9 shows the importance of this sector as brought out in a

sample survey conducted in 1977. From this survey, the unorganized sector is seen to constitute over one-third of the labour force among male workers, and nearly twice the latter group among women. In fact, the figures for registered employment make up only a fraction of the total employment figures brought out by the Census. Table 10 gives the proportions for the CUA, excluding the primary sector (i.e., agriculture, forest occupations etc.).

In other words, in the CUA, over 60 per cent of all industrial workers are in the non-registered category. An even bigger proportion of unregistered workers is engaged in sectors that are broadly non-industrial in character. This includes small manually-operated transport, portering, domestic service, small shops, hawkers, pedlars and similar low-income self-employed occupations.

In all, only about 26.3 per cent of enumerated workers belong to the registered category. To put it another way, non-registered employment

TABLE 9 Employment Situation of the Labour Force (age 15-59) in the Calcutta Metropolitan District, 1977

Description of the population	Male	Female	Total
	(All figures in thousands)		
Total population	3201	2752	5953
Labour force	2791	418	3209
Unemployed	278	60	338
Employed	2513	358	2871
a) Organized sectors	1522	138	1660
b) Unorganized sectors	991	220	1211



TABLE 10 Percentage Distribution of Registered Workers in the CUA, 1981

Composition	No. of workers recorded in census	No. of registered workers	Registered workers as % age of total employed
Manufacturers (incl. gas, electricity, works construction)	18,43,044	6,85,863	37.2
Transport, storage, communication	2,88,393	5,042	1
Service	6,08,586	28,806	4.73
Total	27,40,423	7,19,711	26.3

is three times the registered. It has been estimated that for each 1 per cent increase in formal registered employment (industrial and non-industrial), there is a 4.05 per cent increase in the informal sector.

A core of organized employment, industrial and non-industrial, is surrounded by a wide penumbra of unregistered informal employment. This is how Calcutta is kept reasonably employed, though in a poorly paid and deplorable manner for a large part of the working population.

Table 11, based on a sample survey of 400 households made in 1977, compares the financial status (at 1977 rates) of families enjoying at least partial employment in the formal sector with those employed wholly in the informal sector. The survey clearly shows that most families staffing the informal sector have no members at all working in the formal sector;

and that their mean income, both per family and per worker, is smaller than in the formal sector. The unorganized informal sector is like casual agricultural labour in the villages, with the highest pressure of competition and the lowest wage rate. It may easily be understood that the ratio of workers in the informal sector provides an index of the poverty of the entire population.

Most developing countries display this scenario to a greater or lesser extent. Such informal employment is better than nothing; but its obvious drawbacks are low productivity, decline in quality, and lack of stable employment. Its advantages are flexibility and the capacity to adjust at lower levels if the situation turns bad. We can only hope that, with proper planning and guidance, these small-scale makeshift enterprises will be stabilized, their quality improved and their existence gradually integrated

TABLE 11 Frequency and Mean Monthly Family Income of Families with and without Members Employed in the Formal Sector (1977 Survey)

No. of earners in the family	With at least one worker in the formal sector			With no worker in the formal sector		
	Frequency	Mean monthly family income (Rupees)	Average income per earner (Rupees)	Frequency	Mean monthly family income (Rupees)	Average income per earner (Rupees)
1.	-	-	-	62	166.63	-
2	16	343.75	171.88	137	214.78	107.38
3	16	371.87	123.96	101	274.51	91.50
4	2	425.00	106.25	45	339.94	84.99
5	3	425.00	85.00	15	322.17	64.44
6 and above	-	-	-	3	408.38	68.14



TABLE 12 Percentage Distribution of Workers According to Sector of Activity Among Non-migrants and Migrants in Calcutta and Urban Areas of CMD Districts, 1971, According to Place of Last Residence.

	Percentage Distribution of Workers Calcutta				Percentage Distribution of Workers 24-Parganas			
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
Agriculture	0.08	0.19	Nil	Nil	4.25	5.78	2.86	2.34
Mining, Quarrying, Orchards, Livestock etc.	0.43	0.39	0.47	0.80	0.12	0.16	Nil	Nil
Manufacturing & Processing	27.79	30.33	25.74	23.67	46.25	45.45	47.58	72.01
Construction	2.40	2.30	2.48	1.86	1.88	2.02	1.76	1.17
Commerce & Trade	28.99	30.90	27.44	28.99	15.37	15.60	15.20	7.60
Transport, Communications & Storage	13.55	10.75	15.81	20.21	8.00	7.80	8.15	4.68
Other Services	26.76	25.14	28.06	24.47	24.13	22.19	24.45	12.20
All	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total workers in 000s	1166	521	645	376	800	346	454	171
	Hugli				Haora			
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
Agriculture	4.93	7.77	2.50	3.08	3.51	5.26	0.82	1.18
Mining, Quarrying, Orchards, Livestock etc.	0.90	0.96	0.83	Nil	0.64	0.52	0.81	1.17
Manufacturing & Processing	49.33	44.66	53.33	73.85	50.48	48.42	53.65	59.37
Construction	1.79	1.94	1.67	1.54	1.60	1.58	1.63	1.18
Commerce & Trade	15.70	18.45	13.33	4.62	17.89	20.53	13.82	12.94
Transport, Communication & Storage	6.73	6.80	6.67	6.15	13.10	10.53	17.07	16.47
Other services	20.62	19.42	21.67	10.76	12.78	13.16	12.20	7.69
All	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total Workers in 000s	223	103	120	65	313	190	123	85

Note:

(a) All workers (b) Non-migrants (c) All migrants (d) Migrants from other Indian states



with organized registered industries without dislocating the economic life of the poorer sections of entrepreneurs. This will help them to find their place when the economy as a whole takes off towards modernization and higher productivity.

In the following sections we show several accompanying aspects of this predominance of the informal sector: the role of migrants and of women in employment; the condition of the slums, and the activities of the people living there. These partial views combine to present the total picture of the vast informal workforce: casually employed, poorly paid, rooted half in the countryside and half in the city. They contribute to the activity of the metropolis and accept the major share of its poverty, squalor and diseases. They present the paradox of a peripheral majority. The urban reorganization of Calcutta cannot ignore their significant contribution and pitifully meagre rewards. To make matters worse, they lack all effective legal protection with respect to hours of work, holidays etc.

Migration

The importance of the informal sector in ensuring employment explains the continuous migration from the rural areas into the city. Informal work of a semi-skilled or unskilled nature, however poorly paid, is much more easily available in an urban than a rural area.

Table 12, based in 1971 figures, shows the relative position of local and migrant workers in the CUA. It also shows separately the position of migrants from other states. It will be seen that migrant workers are concentrated in the less remunerative tasks or those involving heavy manual labour. It shows their relative state of desperation as well as a lack of resources or skill.

The Role of Women

The types of occupation available to women in the informal sector are seen from Table 13, based on a 1977 survey. It indicates that about one-fourth of the women workers in the informal sector hold skilled jobs. The rest earn a bare pittance, moving from job to job or holding more than one part-time job. Over half are part-time domestic servants.

In non-domestic work, the occupational distribution of women as revealed in another

TABLE 13 Nature of Female Employment (diagram) in the Informal Sector

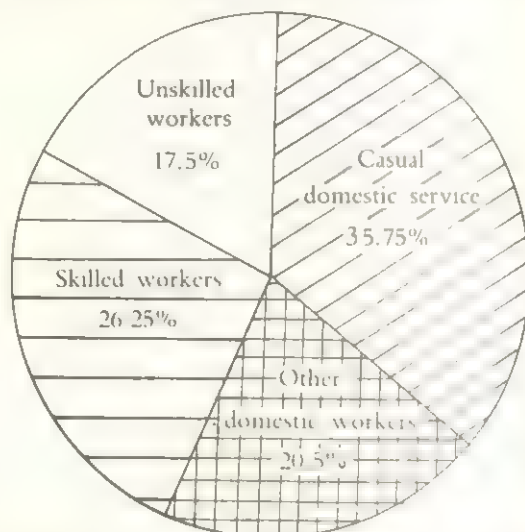


TABLE 14 Distribution of Female Employment by Type in the Informal Sector

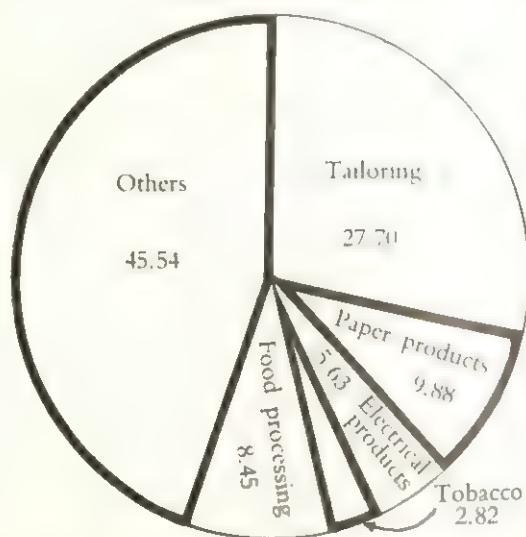
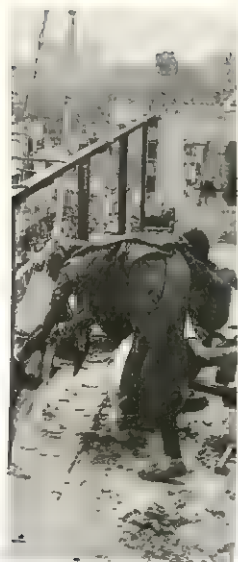


TABLE 15 Nature of Female Self-employment in the Informal Sector

Occupation	No. Self employed	No. in family business
Tailoring	9	5
Paper products	6	3
Cowdung-cake making	7	-
Leather work	1	1
Food processing	1	1
Service	5	5
Others	5	2
Total	34	17



sample survey of 1977 is shown in Table 14. Tailoring emerges as the single most important skilled work in the non-domestic informal sector, while the rest are distributed in light consumer industries on a small-scale basis.

Some women in the informal sector are self-employed, though with a very small income. Table 15 gives an analysis of the self-employed women surveyed in the study cited in Table 13. We may thus see that self-employed women form a significant part of the informal sector.

The Slum Population

No demographic picture of a city in the developing countries is complete without some account of its slums. The slums are a demographic entity by themselves, not unlike the scheduled-caste colonies in many villages. They are often demarcated by well-defined boundaries, and generally located away from the main thoroughfares. In recent years, however, they have spilt over onto every available piece of ground, even danger-zones like the strips of land bordering railway lines. Many slums also occupy prime land owing to their historical origin at a time when such areas had not acquired importance.

The slum population has grown at a much faster rate than the population of the city as a whole. This may be seen for the Calcutta Municipal area from Table 16. This accelerating growth of the slum population also indicates the growing ratio of the impoverished working population of the city. This may be caused by increased flow from outside; it may also reflect the economic decline of an increasing portion of the resident population, who are being forced into cheaper living areas.

The richest component of the slum population, apart from the slum lords themselves, are electrical workers or mechanics of the lowest-paid category. The rest are mostly employed in domestic service, casual labour and the informal sector, as shown in Table 17. Clearly, the higher income levels constitute the lowest percentage of the slum population. Nearly 42 per cent are casual labourers, domestic servants, or engaged in similar non-formal occupations.

A picture of their income distribution, as in Table 18, gives a similar idea of the poverty of the slums. Since an average family consists of

four to five members, the highest monthly income group will be earning a little over Rs 80 per capita, and the modal income will be around Rs 16 or 17 per capita. Obviously, this places most of the slum population below the poverty line. Hence other demographic factors like literacy, death rate, morbidity etc. are all bound to be highly unfavourable. The rates of illiteracy, malnutrition and infant mortality are very much higher in the slums than in the city as a whole.

A survey of the basic amenities in slums revealed that each latrine is used by 40 to 50 people a day, and each source of water (like a tubewell or a tap) by 35 to 45. The usual living space for a family of five is 10 to 12 square metres. Malnutrition is rampant, and about 70 per cent of the births record birth-weights below 2500 grams, resulting in high infant mortality.

A series of welfare schemes have been taken up with national or international funding, but several factors militate against any marked improvement in slum conditions. The facilities provided are over-used, and seldom maintained properly; the slum-dwellers are unable to increase their income significantly over the years; and new groups pour in to join the queue of people without confirmed occupation. Hence the problem of housing is enmeshed with the overall economic problems of the city, and defies any piecemeal solution.

The Pavement-dwellers

No other facet of the city's demographic situation has received more national and international exposure than the life of the pavement-dwellers. They are not a recent phenomenon, as is sometimes thought; nor are they unique to Calcutta. It is hard to say whether or not their numbers are truly increasing. But with the growing prosperity of the middle classes, the pavement-dweller's condition provides a more glaring contrast than before. He is a source of embarrassment to the authorities and the affluent classes only because he exposes to public view a life-style which, in many respects, is not very different from that of the slum-dwellers.

The 1971 Census, as well as a CMDA survey that year, recorded 48,802 pavement dwellers. In 1987, another CMDA survey found 55,571. They average 56 per cent males to 44 per cent



TABLE 16 Slum Population as Percentage of Total Population in CMC Area

	1961	1971	1981
Total population	29,27,289	31,48,746	33,05,006
Slum population	6,47,218	7,75,947	13,50,000
Slum population as percentage of total population	22%	22%	41%

TABLE 17 Frequency of Occupations and Per-Earner Income of Slum Population (1981)

Occupation	No. of earners	Percentage to Total	Income per earner (Rupees)
Owner, thikadar, manager	13,215	5.6	124.82
Operations (mechanical)	11,063	4.7	110.68
Clerical workers	14,365	6.0	110.31
Sales workers	36,705	15.5	76.79
Handicrafts (manual)	58,017	24.5	73.83
Labourers	66,381	28.0	72.06
Services	32,278	13.6	62.10
Other occupations	4,887	2.1	75.32
Total 2,36,911			

TABLE 18 Income Distribution of Slum Population in Calcutta City (1981)

Income level (Rupees)	Families		Average income per month (Rupees)
	Number	percentage	
Up to 50	31,563	16.7	41.5
51 - 100	94,828	50.1	78.65
101 - 150	33,751	17.8	129.8
151 - 200	14,138	7.5	280.7
201 - 250	6,520	3.4	228.8
251 - 300	3,643	1.9	281.9
Above 300	5,041	2.65	425.09
Total 1,89,484			

TABLE 19 Availability of State-run Transport in the Metropolis and Number of Passengers: 1979-82

Year	State Buses			Trams		
	Fleet strength	Average daily outshedding	Passengers carried annually (in 000s)	Fleet strength	Average daily outshedding	Passengers carried annually (in 000s)
1979-80	1059	721	3,63,600	438	320	8939
1980-81	1099	738	2,98,900	438	290	8977
1981-82	1653	723	3,09,100	438	280	9110



6.1 The overflow :
Shanties along a canal



females, and 56 per cent adults to 44 per cent children. In other words, they comprise many more complete or near-complete families than other sections of migrants, showing that they generally consist of whole families seeking a life in the city. As is to be expected, they come from the poorest group in rural areas, with about 68 per cent from West Bengal and the rest from other states. About 64 per cent are permanent migrants; the others come and go, responding to seasonal demands for labour or opportunities for easy pickings. The proportion of beggars is variously estimated from 8 to 20 per cent. The rest are unskilled labourers or small traders. The income of 88 per cent is below Rs 140 a month.

While commiserating with the pavement dwellers and deploring the sanitary, social and human aspects of their existence, we should ponder over two questions. Many of them have no home to go to; or if they have, they would find much less chance of subsistence there. They are coming to the city because here alone can they live.

Hence they can be removed only by making it possible for them to earn a comparable amount at their place of origin. Rigid law-enforcement might make them retreat to

certain areas or play hide-and-seek with the authorities; it will not make them go, so long as the city creates a demand for their services which pays them at least a transfer cost equivalent to their expected income in their original homes. In other words, the key to their rehabilitation is a reduction of poverty at the lowest level in rural Bengal and Bihar: by no means an easy task.

Demographic Pressure and the 'Transport Paradox'

I have deliberately called this section 'the transport paradox' because one of the most obvious impressions of increasing demographic pressure in the CMD is produced by the congestion in buses, trams and local trains. Nothing seems to provide stronger evidence of

- the increasing pressure of population in the city. It is only when we consider the stagnation of migration and the moderate natural growth rate that we start to wonder what lies behind the congestion on the roads: is it caused by pressure of population, or by the functional inadequacies of the transport system?

There is no clear answer to the question; but the earlier account of population figures, and



the data on public transport that I shall now supply, seem to point more to the latter cause. Both passenger and goods flow have undoubtedly increased; but the congestion is much more due to stagnation of the transport services than to the increase of population.

A few facts will make this clear. Table 19 gives the number of state buses and trams put on the road on an average day between 1979 and 1982, against the total strength of the fleet, and the number of passengers carried per annum. The number of passengers shows no conspicuous increase – indeed, for state buses, a marked decline. But the number of vehicles has not increased at all: the number of trams on the road declined from year to year during this period.

This failure of the state-owned transport system has been matched by unbridled profiteering by private operators. Precise data is not available, but it is common knowledge that these operators maximize their profit by lowering the number of buses on the road and the trips made by each, while pushing up the passenger load to an intolerable extent. Hence, although a certain improvement has been noted very recently in the state-run services (state buses and trams), the benefit to the travelling public has not been commensurate. The figures in Table 20 are revealing.

It will be seen that passenger traffic on state buses is rising substantially and on the privately-owned minibuses marginally. The passenger volume on private buses is contracting slightly. But this does not mean that the passenger in a private bus can travel more comfortably than before. Under current operating tactics, the effective number of private buses, and the trips they make, are also likely to shrink unless the bus owners are prepared to face a decline in profit.

In a word, the estimated transport pressure in

the CMD should actually decline; but this may not happen in practice owing to the prevailing modes of operation. The transport congestion is indeed a danger signal – but not of fast-increasing density so much as proportionately declining facilities. The undoubtedly high density of passengers diverts attention from the lapse in management. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, may be said of the congestion caused by street hawkers. Though adequate data is not available, there is reason to assume a similar cause for the shortage in housing, hospital beds, school places, entertainment facilities etc.

In such a situation we have to discard the criterion of optimal benefit. Instead we must seek a saddle-point solution – less optimal but accepted by all sides through an enforcing authority. For instance, such an arrangement will lay down the maximum number of passengers to be carried in a bus or minibus, the minimum area to be kept clear of hawkers at a road junction, the limits of authorized parking space etc. Such short-term compromise solutions may not be spectacular, but they will be of great benefit with comparatively little extra cost, except perhaps some more honest effort from the authorities in enforcing generally accepted laws.

In other words, the 'transport paradox' points to local failures and inadequacies but actually carries a message of hope. Far from being doomed by demographic pressures, the city can find effective and rational solutions to its problems. We may conclude with some thoughts on the future of the metropolis – specially pertinent since its notorious dismissal as a 'dying city'.

It is a fact that cities do indeed live, grow and sometimes die. But unlike in the case of an individual or a small community, the death of a city requires either the total decimation of its population or the growth of an alternative city

TABLE 20 Modal Split of Total Passenger Movement on an Average Weekday in the CMDA Area (in lakhs of passengers)

Year	State buses	Trams	Minibuses	Private buses
1979-80	14.88	9.30	1.65	60.22
1982-83	19.60	12.30	2.25	63.91
1985-86	21.00	12.30	2.40	59.24
1989-90 (projected)	30.00	12.30	2.60	58.84



which can co-ordinate the lives and activities of its citizens. Whatever its historical origins, Calcutta is now, like all metropolitan cities of the world, the nerve centre as well as the heart of a community of some 10 million people directly and even more indirectly. It would be a shortsighted ahistorical view to take the oscillation in its activities as its death throes.

Geographically, Calcutta is in a unique position *vis-à-vis* the whole of eastern India. The growth and prosperity of the region must involve Calcutta. How it will grow, whether through great poverty and increasing disparity or in a planned, disciplined and humane way is the great question to be answered. But the force of economic reality will finally undermine any shortsighted attempt to bypass Calcutta and route the legitimate activities of the metropolis through Delhi or Bombay. History tells us that many rulers of India made such unilateral attempts at shifting capitals and centralizing their rule, without success.

In the long run, social and economic forces, if

sufficiently powerful, have a way of imposing their power. We need have no doubt that the socio-economic forces do exist, in potential, to guide Calcutta into a better twenty-first century, defying all dire predictions about its future.

The tables in this article have been taken from the following sources:

1. Nirmala Banerji, *Women Workers in the Unorganized Sector* (1985)
2. A. Ghosh, *Calcutta the Primate City* (Census Monograph no 2, 1961)
3. – *National and Regional Planning* (1985)
4. Purnendu Jha, *Bustee Health Care Problem of the Urban Poor*
5. Ashok Sen, *Migrant Workers*
6. CMDA: *Calcutta Slums, the Problem and the Effects* (1981)
7. Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories, West Bengal (1981)
8. Census Reports

THE PARSIS OF CALCUTTA

Cyrus J. Madan

There have been Parsis in Calcutta from time immemorial, and today the upholders of the three-millenia-old Zoroastrian heritage can take pride in having carved out for themselves their distinctive niche in the city's life. The community is just about a thousand strong in Calcutta, but it is no mere satellite reflecting the lustre of the west coast of India. Calcutta Parsis have made their own mark in entrepreneurship, industriousness and sportsmanship.

Calcutta once flourished as the capital of an empire, the bustling hub of commerce. Near the centre of activities dwelt the long-nosed, long-coated Parsis. They had undergone a somewhat mysterious alchemy: perhaps the coming of the British acted as a catalyst, turning the one-time farming community into an entrepreneurial one.

The earliest known and recorded history of a Parsi in Calcutta commences in 1767 with the arrival of Dadabhoy Behramji Banaji from Surat. A flourishing trader, 'Banaji Seth' was patronized by John Cartier, then Governor of Bengal but earlier in charge of British commercial interests in Surat. He was the doyen of the famous Banaji family which made a deep mark in the commercial and industrial history of Bengal.

After these early inroads into Bengal commerce, the person who truly raised the name of Banaji to legendary heights was Seth Rustomji

Kawasji Banaji. He first came to Calcutta on business in 1812 and was so enchanted by the city that he settled here with his family in 1838.

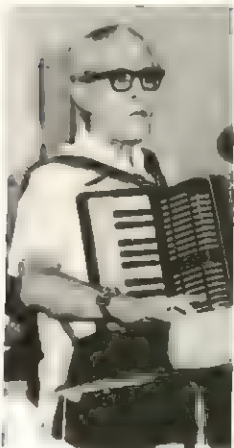
'Rustomji Babu' was one of the high-profile figures of the city's industrial world. He founded the Sun Insurance Office and carried on a very extensive business as a merchant and shipowner. His activity and enterprise made him renowned among men of business all over the East. The cornerstone of his entrepreneurial activities was shipping. Along with his sons, he not only owned a fleet of twenty-seven ships but in 1837 bought the Calcutta Docking Company - i.e., the Khidirpur Docks.

Seth Rustomji Banaji was famous not only for his business acumen but for his social and philanthropic ventures. He founded the first fire temple at no 26 Ezra Street on 16 September 1839. The fire temple, now named after him, is only one of many memorials of this great man. The British also honoured him by appointing him among the twelve Justices of the Peace created in 1835.

Of course the Banajis were not the only Parsi family of repute in the city's three-hundred-year-old history. Many other illustrious families either flourished alongside them or followed in their footsteps. Most of these families rose from the depths of poverty to wealth and eminence by dint of their inherent ability, perseverance and hard labour.

Seth Jamshedji Framji Madan's rise is one

7.1 V. Balsara



such shining example of the Parsi spirit of adventure and philanthropy. Starting his career at twelve as a scene shifter in a theatrical company at four rupees a month, 'Madan Seth' soon had a prosperous company of his own. In 1885, at the age of twenty-nine, he started another business as a wine and provision merchant at no 5 Dharmatala Street (now Lenin Sarani). Like many other Parsi elders of his community, Seth Jamshedji had a generous nature and was a notable philanthropist. Another special contribution he made was as a pioneer of the Indian cinema industry, perfecting it for public showing. By the time of his death in 1923, he owned over a hundred cinemas dotted all over the country. In recognition of his services and far-spread charities, the British government honoured him with the OBE in 1918 and the CBE in 1923.

Because of the city's geographical location, the two mainstays of Calcutta's prosperity were shipping and the jute trade. Parsi families were in the vanguard in both sectors. The Banajis and the Madans had many peers: the Mehtas (who owned textile mills and established the second fire temple in 1912), the Guzdars and the Modis, to name just a few. These men were known as 'Sethiyas' because of their benevolence, their hearts being as large as their fortunes.

Calcutta's Parsis declined in power and prosperity with the departure of the British, who had first acted as a catalyst for their entrepreneurial prowess. Soon after Independence, their social and philanthropic ventures grew increasingly restricted to their own community. Parsi entrepreneurship lost its impetus, and the large commercial empires slowly faded away. The once thriving community receded into the background, and that without much attention.

Yet the Calcutta Parsis have not, of course, degenerated as a community. Their men and women still contribute appreciably to the life of Calcutta and of India whether through firms like M.N. Dastur and Co., the internationally known technical consultants, or through individuals like Cushrow Irani, Managing Director of *The Statesman*, and Pesi Narielvala, some-



time head of the Chartered Accountants Institute. Among many recent Parsi philanthropists, Rusi B. Gimi, ex-Sheriff of Calcutta, is pre-eminent. Admirable too is the achievement of Mrs. Dhun Adenwalla in setting up the city's first Oral School for the Deaf. The children of the Oral School are now well-known because of their theatrical troupe, the Action Players, guided by another Parsi, Zareen Choudhuri. Again, Ardeshir Batlivala did a great deal for the Scouting Movement in Bengal, and set up the Parsi Scout Troop as one of the finest in India.

The Parsis have their own sports club on their Maidan which encourages all forms of sport: as if in tribute to the range offered, Shireen Kiash (*née* Contractor) became India's first triple international, representing the country in basketball, hockey and cricket. And in Calcutta's musical world, Vistasp Balsara holds a unique position by his command over virtually any instrument and his blends of Eastern and Western classical music.

The Parsis of Calcutta may no longer be at the helm of affairs; but they play a worthy part in the city's complex community life.

7.2 A Parsi family at home

THE CHINESE OF CALCUTTA

Jawhar Sircar

Of the foreign communities that have made Calcutta their home, the Chinese are the only ones to remain and prosper as much as before. They were relatively late to arrive. While China had sent itinerant tradesmen, peripatetic monks or scholars and curious travellers to visit India right through history, the first Chinese settler in India, Yong Atchew, came only around 1780. His scarlet horseshoe-shaped tomb can be seen on the banks of the Hugli at Achipur, the village he founded fifteen miles south of Calcutta and which draws its name from him. It has become a shrine visited by all Chinese of these parts at least once, during their New Year festivities. The Imperial Archives inform us that Warren Hastings granted Atchew some 650 bighas of land at an annual rent of Rs 45 to start a sugar plantation and sugar mill. One hundred and ten Chinese came at Atchew's call to work for him.

By April 1782, Yong Atchew had 2000 maunds of sugar ready for sale along with good quantities of the popular spirit *arrack*, but his enterprise was plagued with troubles. Desertion of labour was so chronic that Hastings issued a 'Warning Notice' on 5 November 1781 against 'several ill-disposed persons [who] have endeavoured to entice away the Chinese labourers in the employ of Atchew, a native of China, now under the protection of this Government.' Paucity of funds was the other problem. Atchew took a loan from the

East India Company against his personal bond and a pledge to bring over more craftsmen from China the following season. But his fortunes never looked up, and he died broken-hearted about the year 1783. Of his associates and workmen remaining, most are reported to have come to Calcutta to join their vagabond compatriots, the 'Macao ship deserters': Chinese sailors who, virtually kidnapped or 'Shanghaied' into service, had deserted ship and were waiting for a 'friendly' vessel. Thus the Chinese made an entry into the city proper.

Sixty-five years after Atchew's death, Colesworthy Grant observed that the twenty-five Chinese shoemakers of Kasaitola (Bentinck Street) 'manufacture with much taste and at moderate charges'. Moreover, 'all carpenters attached to our ships in the country service are Chinese', and 'in matters of skill and ingenuity the Chinese mechanics and artizans may claim precedence of all other Orientals'. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Calcutta Chinese had established themselves as a skilled, industrious, sober, honest, and above all a clean people. The only charges brought against them related to their 'fearful addiction to opium smoking... which leads to occasional midnight brawls, mainly over gambling ... with serious consequences'.

Almost every 'subsequent decade brought new faces from China, in both Imperial and Republican times. With every fresh influx, the

8.1 Aunsen, a Chinese shoemaker. Emily Eden



community renewed its cultural links with 'Mother China' and thus preserved its ethnic integrity. The forefathers of most of today's Calcutta Chinese arrived during the turbulent days of Kuomintang rule. The Second World War and Mao's Revolution also sent migrants to India. The 1951 Census found only 5,710 Chinese in Calcutta, with perhaps a couple of thousand more in 24-Parganas District. Today they are estimated to number 20,000 – the overwhelming majority of all the Chinese in India. Most of them are Indian citizens; only some 1,000 to 1,500 are British or Chinese nationals. The greater part are 'Hakka', followed by the Cantonese and the 'Hupey'. Traditionally the Hakka have been tanners and shoemakers. The Cantonese took to carpentry and restaurant-keeping; the Hupey are dentists. Laundries have been the stronghold of the small Shanghai groups.

The community has sustained its re-creation

of a 'little China' on Indian soil, with traditional temples, dragon-architecture, and festoons in their own language, with the rustle of real silk and the aroma of Chinese food. The original Chinatown in central Calcutta around Bentinck Street, Phears Lane and the adjoining part of Rabindra Sarani, has largely given way to multi-storied office complexes and only comes alive in an open-air bazaar for a few hours at dawn each day. It has been overtaken by a second one at Tangra in east Calcutta, now rendered accessible by the Eastern Bypass. The 'Tangra-type food' that tempts the gourmet has evolved in what is really a Chinese-owned tannery zone set up some seventy years ago but grown prosperous over the last two decades. The whole area has grown up round the tanneries-cum-residences with high walls, fortress-like gates and huge padlocks – an exclusive domain where even the municipal

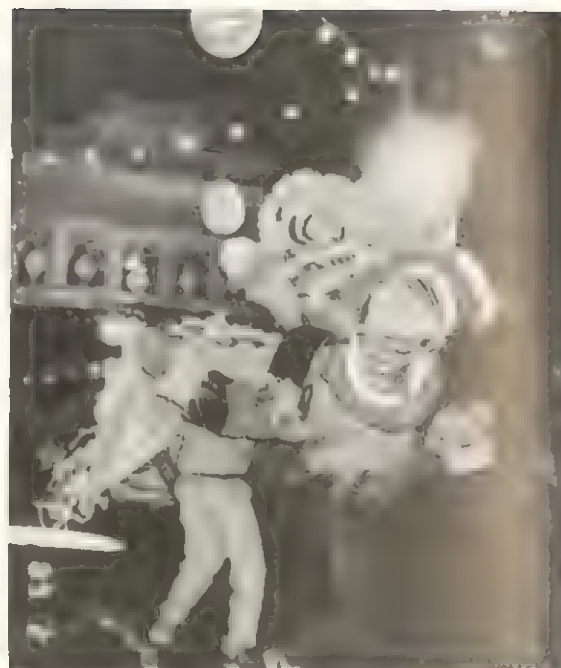
8.2 *Chinese shoemakers today*





Left :
8.3 Food market in
Chinatown

Right :
8.4 Chinese New Year
celebrations



Leather – its tanning, manufacture and trade – has for over a century been the most important occupation of the Chinese in Calcutta. Carpentry, dentistry and hair-dressing are next in importance, followed by laundries and piggeries. Chinese restaurants, needless to say, are a growing business, though both Chinese and other gourmets often doubt the authenticity of the commercialized fare. Queues of cars stand parked in the narrow lanes of Tangra, outside anonymous but assiduously-run eating-houses, a testimony to Calcutta's fondness for this cuisine for which the city has long been famous.

Of late Chinese entrepreneurs have also taken to the pharmaceutical and food-processing industries – manufacturing sauces, pickles, sea foods and the like. Difficulties with financial institutions are overcome with help from within the community. Money now flows to the Chinese as never before: dozens of them have made fortunes that Yong Atchew could never dream of. But the greater number, needless to say, are still at different stages of struggle. Migration to Europe, North America and Australia has also taken its toll among the Western-educated generation.

Two Chinese newspapers are regularly published from Calcutta: there was a third till 1963. *The Chinese Journal of India* – avowedly

pro-Kuomintang with a focus on Taiwan – is over fifty years old, while *The Overseas Chinese Commerce of India* dates from 1969. The Chinese also run four schools, and clubs like the old Chooney Thong and the Chinese Tanners' form an essential part of their social life in Calcutta.

Festivals are celebrated with the gaiety of Chinatowns everywhere: the Chinese New Year in February with lights, firecrackers, dragon dances and traditional music; the 'Rice Pudding Festival' five months later, and the 'Moon Festival' in another three months with its delicious moon-shaped cakes. But the Chinese also observe All Souls' Day and Christmas, Durga Puja and Diwali. Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity coexist in Chinatown: Chinese temples are as well attended as Christian churches, and the ceremonial red candles or *lap chok* and the *siang joss-sticks* may be placed before any god. A more sumptuous accompaniment of festivities is the *sau chu* or whole pig, roasted complete with curly tail, and served to the gods on ornamental trays.

Candles and joss-sticks are also faithfully offered every year at the gleaming red tomb of Yong Atchew. He died a broken man, but two hundred years of history can testify how much Calcutta owes to his vision and enterprise.



THE ANGLO-INDIANS OF CALCUTTA



Kuntala Lahiri Dutt

Although a small minority in the population of India, the Anglo-Indian community holds a unique position in post-colonial Asia. While the Anglo-Burmans have disappeared from the social and political scene in Burma and the Burghers in Sri Lanka, the Anglo-Indians – although a much smaller proportion of the total population of their country – still occupy a distinct place in the Indian polity. In fact, they are the only such community of mixed descent to survive in Asia as a recognizable entity.

Calcutta having been the headquarters of the East India Company and later the premier city of the British Empire, it was virtually here that the community was born, and here that it had its principal home. As enumeration by communities has been discontinued since the 1961 Census, we do not know exactly how many Anglo-Indians are living today in the various parts of India. But the leaders of the community inform us that the majority is in Calcutta.

The first appellation for such persons of dual racial heritage seems to have been 'Indo-Briton'. It was not until 1911 that the term 'Anglo-Indian' was officially accepted. Just before Independence, there was an abortive attempt to introduce the title of 'Britasian'. Today, the Constitution of India accepts all descendants from European (not merely British) patrilineal heritage as Anglo-Indians.

Till the latter half of the eighteenth century, there was little difference in position between Anglo-Indians and Europeans proper. (We should also remember the 'old style' of referring to the British colonists themselves as 'Anglo-Indians'.) Members of the community were given generous allocations of posts in defence and administration. The Anglo-Indians grew rapidly in wealth, social power and status; they also soon outnumbered the British in India. Well versed in the English language and at home with Western ways, they became indispensable in every branch of the Company's service. Herbert A. Stark, the historian of his community, writes:

But for the presence in India of successive generations of those sprung from British fathers and Indian mothers, it may well be questioned whether in India, England would ever have passed from the market-place to the forum, from the factory to the Council Chamber, from merchandise to Empire, from company to Crown.

As might have been expected, the Anglo-Indians were isolated from other Indian communities from the outset. Indian women associated with the community were ostracized by their own kind; and the Anglo-Indians, predictably, played on their affinities with the ruling race. In addition to material benefits, there were also psychological factors drawing them towards an ever-elusive 'Home' across



the ocean. This attachment probably grew through oral traditions handed down the paternal line, and led to an emotional dependence on the British that would greatly handicap the community later on.

The distinction between British and Anglo-Indian began to appear in the late eighteenth century. From then until 1857, the British made calculated efforts to curb Anglo-Indian aspirations. Their entry into higher military and civil posts was restricted, and their children were prevented from going to England to receive the education that would qualify them for such posts. Suddenly those who had formed 'a link of union between the English and the natives' were being perceived as 'the most rapidly accumulating evil in Bengal'. Those were dark years for the Anglo-Indians. But adversity had the desirable effect of jolting them out of an unshakeable loyalty to the British into a search for their own identity.

The immediate need, they perceived, was for suitable education. A number of flourishing institutions grew up in Calcutta on the model of the British public schools. The need of the hour was met by talented leaders. John William Ricketts (1791-1835) and James Kyd (1786-1836) played a major role in founding the Parental Academic Institution. But on a higher plane, the most influential Anglo-Indian of the age was the talented young Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31). He was more than a poet or a professor at Hindu College. He heralded a new era in the life of English-educated Bengalis as the spearhead of the 'Young Bengal' movement. Ironically, he was not able during his short life to galvanize his own community and reveal to them their true identity. He must have understood that their survival and success lay in forging closer links with 'native' Bengal.

With the inauguration of the railways, the telegraphs and the postal system in the mid-nineteenth century, the Anglo-Indians again became important in the British scheme of things: they could fill the intermediate positions in these strategic sectors. As a reward for their support in the 1857 Revolt, they were also given a bigger share of jobs in the Police, Customs, Army and medical services for men; in education and the nursing services for women.

By the turn of the century, however, a rising local intelligentsia forced the administration to Indianize the system. Again the Anglo-Indians

suffered a setback. Most of the job reservations were abolished, and the artificial security that the community had enjoyed vanished for good. To add to these material difficulties, the Anglo-Indians were placed in an unenviable social position: caught between two culture-systems and two hostile political forces, unable to identify with either 'fatherland' or 'motherland', treated with disparagement by the British and distrust and resentment by the Indians.

The most important events for the community in this century were the two World Wars and the Independence of India. Frank Anthony, a leader and historian of the community, calculates that about seventy-five per cent of Anglo-Indians joined the forces in the First World War, while in the Second, they contributed more to the war effort, proportionate to their numbers, than 'any other community not only in India but in the Commonwealth'. The Wars also brought the Anglo-Indians into direct contact with the 'white men' – the British and American contingents.

With its heightened self-awareness, coupled with a growing sense of marginalization, the community again passed through a stage of flux. Cedric Dover, a naturalist, tried to organize a united movement of all such mixed races in South and South-East Asia. It was at this time that E.T. McCluskie set up a co-operative society to build a homeland for the Anglo-Indians, an Anglo-India. Both efforts failed owing to the continuing disinclination of the community to look beyond the limits imposed on their vision through centuries of conditioning under British influence.

Then came the 'final betrayal': what the community viewed as their abandonment by the British when India was granted Independence, leaving them vulnerable to attack from the forces of Indian nationalism which they had opposed and suppressed as allies of the British. The most predictable reaction was a massive exodus to the English-speaking countries: UK, USA, Canada and Australia.

But simultaneously, there was a new patriotic development among such Anglo-Indians as remained. To them India was home. On the Indian side too, initial distrust – sometimes vented in vehement and objectionable form – yielded to good sense and

amity Anglo-Indian leaders joined the nationalists in framing the Constitution of India. The seats still reserved for them in the Lok Sabha and some State Assemblies, including West Bengal, are now a symbol of involvement, not of isolation.

The question may nonetheless arise: how completely have the Anglo-Indians of Calcutta been assimilated to the mainstream of city life? The community has maintained its identity through endogamous marriages and other social practices special to itself. It retains its own forums and meets regularly at its clubs and social gatherings with their own special *joie de vivre*. It also runs charitable institutions which benefit not only its own members but other sections of the city's poor. At the same time, the community has integrated itself with broader Calcutta society through everyday exchanges with other groups, both in their working lives and, increasingly, through social interaction. The Indian languages are cultivated and Indian dress worn with ease and grace by Anglo-Indian women. Indeed, because of the sharp concentration of Anglo-Indians within the city, they may be said to be more truly 'Calcuttan' than their Bengali fellow-citizens.

Also, more than one generation of the Bengali elite has by now studied in Anglo-Indian schools and acquired something of that way of life. This has helped immensely in knitting the communities together. The Anglo-Indian ethos is no longer a monopoly of the community: it is a value-system independent of religious or communal alliance. The Anglo-Indian influence has worked to shape the modern Bengali mind, not only in Derozio's time but also today.

The Anglo-Indians have given of their cultural heritage in the city's schools, its practice of Western music, both classical and popular, its churches and its welfare organizations. Their great contribution to Calcutta's world of sport has been chronicled elsewhere in this book. In education, the names of Clifford Hicks, Austin D'Souza and the Vyse brothers are but a few in a long list of successful teachers and administrators. Anglo-Indians




popularized Western music in Calcutta: many of the finest artistes e.g. John Meyer, Peter Sarstedt and Marie Sampson, moved on to greener pastures in the West.

It is to the new cerebral sport of quizzing now sweeping the country that this small community has also contributed more than its proportionate share. Pioneered by the city's own Neil O'Brien, Calcutta's Francis Groser, John Mason, Alban Scoll and the two younger O'Briens – Derek and Barry – are household names among quiz enthusiasts.


The Anglo-Indian woman was an unwitting trail-blazer of women's emancipation in the city. She was carrying out secretarial duties in commercial offices, nursing and teaching at a time when few Indian women ventured out to work – well before that other pioneer of women's independence, the refugee girl from East Pakistan. Indeed, the working Anglo-Indian girl may be called the pillar of her community's survival, and in many cases her family's.

There are fewer recognizable Anglo-Indians on Calcutta streets than a generation ago; but this is not due solely to their reduced numbers. It is equally because today's Anglo-Indians wish to blend with their milieu, to identify with the total life of the city which is home for them.

9.1 The Anglo-Indian teacher meets her pupil and friend. from *Aparna Sen's 36 Chowringhee Lane*



THE EAST BENGAL REFUGEES A LESSON IN SURVIVAL



Nilanjana Chatterjee

During its three-hundred-year history, Calcutta has become a venue, and practically a metaphor, for survival and opportunity. Job Charnock issued a proclamation inviting people of all nationalities to settle in his new township. Over time, the economic and cultural life of Calcutta has been largely sustained by its migrant population.

The 1951 Census found only some 33.2 per cent of Calcutta's inhabitants to be city-born. The rest, including a small group of non-Indians, were migrants; 12.3 per cent from elsewhere in West Bengal, 26.6 per cent from other Indian States, and 26.9 per cent from what had become East Pakistan in 1947. While the other migrants illustrated the acceleration of established trends in rural dislocation, demographic mobility and colonial urbanization, the migration from East Pakistan told a different tale. These 6,85,672 people were officially classed as 'displaced persons'. They were primarily Hindu refugees, dislocated by the events arising out of the partition of British India and the creation of Pakistan.

Inevitably, the trauma of displacement scarred not only the refugees themselves but the host population. In the post-Independence era, the city of migrants became a city of refugees, as the exodus which began in 1946 continued nearly four decades later, with changes in cause, character, scale and impact.

Since the history of Calcutta has been inex-

tricably bound up with the refugees' struggles for survival, the city itself as a physical entity and a cultural process can be read as a text for some understanding of the dynamics of post-Partition reconstruction. Among the varied signifiers of refugee experiences are the urban topography of squatter colonies and pavement shanties; West Bengal party politics and the interlocutory activism of organizations such as the United Central Refugee Council; the films of Ritwik Ghatak; enduring folk memories of post-Partition inflation, rationing, black-marketing and the nightmare that was Shealdah Station; compelling evocations of *Sonar Bangla* in the lilt of a dialect and the taste of a fish curry; acts of introduction that involve genealogies extending beyond the Padma River. These signifiers suggest at least as many narratives of displacement and rehabilitation as there are refugees, each one a reminder of human suffering and enterprise.

This article presents an interpretative version of two representative accounts. One may be called the official discourse, which perceives the refugees as objects of assistance and as such a 'problem' group. The other may be called a refugee counter-discourse that assigns centrality to the displaced themselves in reconstructing their lives, and may even hold the government responsible for exacerbating the refugee 'problem'. The narratives will be condensed to provide an overview of the refugees' changing





relation with Calcutta and the dynamics of their rehabilitation.

Defining the Refugees

The minorities who fled from East Pakistan through fear of the actual event of discrimination and violence were all equally refugees by experience. But they were not a homogeneous group. They were differentiated by period or wave of migration; reason for flight; place of origin and subsequent trajectory; caste, class, occupation; and status *vis-à-vis* the government's assistance programme.

The time of displacement was crucial to the last factor. Refugees were classified as 'old' or 'new' migrants. The 'old migrants' were the 41.17 lakh people who escaped to India from former East Bengal between October 1946 and March 1958 in different waves. 31.32 lakh of them are estimated to have remained in West Bengal, while the rest dispersed throughout India. Those who migrated between April 1958 and December 1963 were not considered eligible for Government help. The unofficial figures for refugees who settled of their own accord in West Bengal in this liminal period is in the region of 2.5 lakh.

January 1964 and March 1971 bracket the period of 'new migrants'. Responding to a sharp rise in migration, the Indian Government took a policy decision that relief and rehabilitation benefits would only be extended to those



10.1 & 10.2
Refugees at Shealdah
Station, 1959. Jogen
Choudhuri

'new migrants' who agreed to be resettled outside West Bengal. In spite of this, of the 11.14 lakh displaced between 1964 and 1970, about 6 lakh chose to stay in West Bengal. Finally, the 80-lakh wave during the Bangladesh War of 1971 left behind, on a conservative estimate, about 2 lakh refugees as human flotsam in West Bengal.

It must be remembered that most of these statistics are unreliable. In 1981, the Government of West Bengal estimated the total number of displaced people from East Bengal in the State to be about 80 lakh, or one-sixth the total population of West Bengal. Of these, a hefty proportion was settled in the Calcutta Metropolitan District: the third biggest concentration, after 24-Parganas and Nadia Districts.

Rethinking Stereotypes

Refugees are helped for humanitarian reasons and because they present a long-term development problem. But ironically, the assistance paradigm casts the refugees in a supplicatory, helpless position, perpetuating a vicious spiral. East Bengal refugees have long been negatively stereotyped as victims and trouble-makers – indolent, obstructive, unreasonably demanding and unwilling to adapt to new environments. These canards are refuted by abundant evidence of self-reliance and the will to survive against tremendous odds. The displaced tended to take refuge in West Bengal seemingly regardless of



specific Government policy. Individually and as groups, they projected a survivor mentality, manipulating and, where necessary, resisting official assumptions about dependence. They dynamically influenced the outcome of organized assistance, though many of their survival strategies were considered illegal or anti-social by the host Government and population. While they might have presented a 'problem', they also testified to a unique potential for positive change and development.

The Historical Context

The 'unending trail' of migration began roughly with the Partition of Bengal, though it was preluded by increasing trends towards communal separatism in the years preceding the transfer of power, with violence in Calcutta, Bihar and the Noakhali-Tipperah Districts as early as 1946. This led to the westward migration of 14,000 East Bengalis already in that year. However, Bengal was relatively quiet in 1947. Hence it was hoped that the 15.6 million non-Muslims left in East Pakistan after Partition – 42 per cent of the Hindu population of undivided Bengal – would remain there, the common Bengali culture proving stronger than religious differences.

The fact remained that in the colonial period, the Hindus had exercised considerable domination over the Muslims of East Bengal. Hence the new movement for self-determination, assertion of Muslim identity and attempts to reverse the old power structure strained and repeatedly tore the bonds between Hindus and Muslims in East Pakistan since the mid-1940s.

People who fled to India believed they had a historical and moral right to refuge within its borders, as well as to compensation for the price they believed they were forced to pay for Partition. This conviction was strengthened by statements like Nehru's on 15 August 1947:

We think also of our own brothers and sisters who have been cut off from us by political boundaries and who unhappily cannot share at present in the freedom that has come. They are of us and will remain of us whatever may happen, and we shall be sharers in their good and ill fortune alike.

The 'Old Migrants': 1946-1949

After Partition, 2,58,000 migrants sought shelter in West Bengal in 1947 alone. This number increased by 5,90,000 in 1948 and

1,82,000 in 1949. Interestingly, there was no overt communal conflict in East Pakistan during these years; but as Kiranshankar Ray, leader of the Congress Party in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly, pointed out in 1948, there were many and widespread instances of harassment, extortion and persecution of the minorities, which in turn fed their fears – of physical annihilation, political powerlessness, social and economic deterioration, and loss of identity.

On the Indian side, certain emergency governmental relief measures were supplemented by an immense public relief effort. At the same time, the Government clearly did not wish to encourage migration by offering attractive relief. It was also feared that too great an exodus would strain Hindu-Muslim relations in India. These and a number of other political factors led to an agreement at the Inter-Dominion Conference of April 1948 that the responsibility for the protection of minorities would rest exclusively with the government of the country concerned. A fall in the influx subsequent to the agreement allowed Nehru to believe, prematurely as it turned out, that the worst of the exodus was over. It was even anticipated that the migration was temporary and could be reversed. Hence the emphasis was on relief rather than rehabilitation: measures for the latter were limited and piecemeal.

Many of these early refugees had pre-Partition ties, of occupation or kinship, with West Bengal and specifically Calcutta. Others were civil servants who opted to work in India. Hence most of these early migrants had some resources in West Bengal and could find niches for themselves. Of the 13.78 lakh persons displaced by December 1949, only 1.06 lakhs sought admission to relief camps. The vast majority who did not were surveyed around this time by the Indian Statistical Institute: they were found to belong to the 'upper' and 'middle' castes, who tended to gravitate to urban areas including Calcutta. (The 'lower' and scheduled castes preferred resettlement in villages.) Significantly, 60 per cent of the migrants upto 1949 were non-agriculturists.

As these *bhadralok* migrants converged on Calcutta, there resulted an acute housing shortage in an already congested city. Some refugees who had the means bought property or exchanged it with evacuee Muslims: this

could happen as a group effort, creating 'private colonies'. A considerable number rented houses, in middle-class localities or slums. But it was the squatters who made East Bengali refugees famous or infamous.

Squatting ranged from the forcible occupation of barracks in the Dhakuria Lake area and New Alipur by individual families and of empty country villas in suburban Calcutta, to the collective take-over of private, government and waste lands and the establishment of 'colony' communities. This happened as early as 1948 with middle-class refugees in the Jadabpur area: first on government land, then on private property, leading to violent clashes. Having won the battle, the elated squatters named their colony 'Bijaygarh', the Fort of Victory. By 1949 there were over forty such colonies in the south-east of the Calcutta Metropolitan District, in Jadabpur, Kasba, Santoshpur, Garia and Behala, and about sixty-five in the Dumdum and Panihati zone in the north.

There was a pattern to the squatter movement: *jabardakhal* (seizure and settlement) came to acquire the quality of a myth. The land, identified in advance, would usually be occupied under cover of night; plots would be marked off, and shacks erected with incredible speed, thatched with the *hogla* leaves that became an emblem of squatter life. Young girls were often left in charge of a newly-set-up hearth to forestall violent eviction. Subscriptions and joint labour, supervised by the colony committee, went into clearing the land and laying down roads, drains and a water supply.

Not only were the refugees themselves proud of having built these settlements almost entirely from their own assistance; their pioneer spirit was lauded by government rehabilitation authorities like N.B. Maiti and Rameshwari Nehru. Property owners were naturally – and often violently – hostile, but public opinion was generally favourable. The refugees themselves asserted the 'respectable' nature of their formally illegal acts, driven by dire necessity for shelter, and looked to the Government to legalize their claim in the extraordinary circumstances.

The refugees were gradually identified with the Left, particularly the Communists, although the latter were at first actually suspicious of the refugees as being potentially

reactionary and anti-Muslim. Soon, however, the grievances of the refugee have-nots became a major issue in Leftist opposition politics and a factor behind the radicalization of politics in the state. This in turn reinforced the view, in certain circles, of the refugees as a potentially disruptive force in society.

The 'Old Migrants': 1950

Communal conflict broke out in Khulna in December 1949, and had spread all over East Pakistan by February 1950, setting off a new wave of migration. This led to counter-violence in Calcutta and a counter-wave of Muslim migration from West Bengal, making the passage unsafe for all the displaced. This time the refugees from East Pakistan were chiefly rural – peasant proprietors, traders and artisans.

As tension mounted, there was pressure on the Government of India for either a military or a negotiated solution. In April 1950, Prime Minister Nehru signed a pact with his Pakistani counterpart Liaquat Ali Khan, which guaranteed equality of citizenship to minorities irrespective of religion. It also guaranteed freedom of movement, with the right to move personal property across the frontier. Migrants who returned home by the end of 1950 would have their immovable property restored; others could continue to hold it or dispose of it through trustees.

The immediate result of the Pact was a drop in migration and even a small but much publicized repatriation. But by August 1950, it was already being argued in Parliament that the Pact was being implemented by India alone. The notional retention by the refugees of the title to their abandoned property also prevented them from receiving the compensation which would have helped to rehabilitate them in their new homes.

Meanwhile, a Branch Secretariat of the Rehabilitation Ministry was set up at Calcutta in 1950. Its optimistic estimates allowed for only 2 lakh assistance-seekers, just half of them in West Bengal. In fact, 75,000 were admitted to refugee camps, pending planned rehabilitation, in March alone; about 25,000 per month from April to September, and nearly 10,000 per month thereafter. Tent colonies, empty warehouses and even steamers were set up as temporary shelters. Those who sought



admission to camps were taken to special reception centres like Shealdah Station prior to dispersal. Delays caused thousands of refugees to become a fixture there, and transit camps were opened in and around Calcutta to reduce the pressure – in the jute godowns of Ultadanga, Kashipur, Ghusuri and Babu Ghat.

Families which could be resettled were sent temporarily to regular camps like Dhubulia, the largest in West Bengal with a capacity of 60,000, and Cooper's Camp which was meant for refugees to be rehabilitated outside West Bengal. Long-term responsibilities such as widows, orphans and the old and infirm were sent to 'permanent liability' camps. Camp inmates were given maintenance doles of foodgrains and cash; they also had access to the camp medical facilities and schools. The target date for closing all regular camps was set for 30 April 1950.

Of the 11.82 lakh refugees who were supposed to have entered West Bengal in 1950, only 23 per cent actually took shelter in the camps. But the figure in real terms was too large for the camp facilities in the state and critics soon pointed to the overcrowding, insanitary conditions, inadequate rations and

water supply, disease, high death rates, corruption among camp personnel and demoralizing delays in dispersal. In the early days of 1950 the city itself seemed to be converted into a relief camp. The refugees received aid from voluntary and charitable organizations, college students and concerned private citizens. But as the migrations continued, concern gave way to resigned inertia and then to competition over shrinking economic resources.

All studies suggest that the refugees responded to the inadequate relief and rehabilitation resources with enterprise and flexibility. In the process of self-settlement, caste rules were bent, traditional occupations were abandoned in the search for employment, families became more nuclear and women came out of the home to work. With the coming of the refugees the city registered an increase in its young, educated population; the growth of its industrial labour, the service sector and small business; and the rapid expansion of settlements. Most of these were squatters colonies concentrated in the industrial zone of Calcutta, 24 Parganas, Hugli and Haora, extending along the east bank of the river



10.3 Refugee shanties being dismantled at the Dhakuria Lakes

between Naihati and Sonarpur. But the 1950 colonies also developed along the west bank between Magra and Uluberia, particularly in the Bali and Haora municipalities. By the end of 1950, there were around 150 squatter colonies, accommodating roughly 30,000 families on 2,400 acres of land. Their names – Surya Sen Nagar, Bapujinagar, Bidhanpalli, Adarshanagar – reflected their creators' memories of the past and hopes for the future.

The 'Old Migrants': 1951-1958

The migration from East Pakistan continued unabated through the 1950s. In 1951, threatened by unrest in Pakistan over the Kashmir issue, 1.40 lakh people fled to West Bengal. Passports were introduced in 1951 as a check to migration, yet 1.52 lakhs came that year and 1.64 lakhs in 1953-54. In 1955, Pakistan declared Urdu to be its official language; in 1956 it adopted an Islamic constitution. The migration to West Bengal mounted to 2.12 lakhs and 2.47 lakhs respectively. In a last attempt to stem the influx, all assistance was stopped to migrants after March 1958.

The pressure of refugees forced the Government of West Bengal to reopen its camps in 1951. As the new migrants were chiefly from the depressed sections of Hindus, often totally pauperized by displacement, increasingly larger numbers came to the camps – as much as 50 per cent of the total inflow in 1955-56. By 1958, there were about 8 lakh refugees in some 150 camps and homes in West Bengal. One-third of them had spent six to ten years in camps. Dispersal was slow because 60 per cent of the inmates were agriculturists. There was an acute shortage of land in West Bengal, and acceptable sites elsewhere were difficult to find.

Official attempts at rehabilitation crystallized in the 1950s. Only around 1955 did the Government begin replacing *ad hoc* assistance measures by planned rehabilitation on a rational or economic basis. From about 1958, such programmes were sought to be integrated into comprehensive regional development programmes. The Government's overall effort did help stimulate some economic growth in Calcutta and West Bengal, but in the process highlighted the lost opportunities for progress.

In general, rehabilitation schemes were



10.4 The refugees' new quarters at Tollyganj Lake Camp

divided into rural and urban categories. The rural assistance programmes were gradually geared to a search for land in other states, especially Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and the Andaman Islands. Such attempts pointed the way to the Dandakaranya Project initiated in 1958.

Urban settlement, most relevant in the context of Calcutta, included the provision of homestead land in a Government colony and loans to build a house and set up in a trade or profession. Large schemes were also taken on hand to expand civic facilities in refugee settlements and convert camps into colonies. In the Calcutta region, this included townships at Ultadanga, Sodepur and Madhyamgram and housing projects at Ganguli Bagan, Behala and Ban Hugli. Squatter colonies set up by 31 December 1950 were officially accepted in the face of opposition from landowners; but despite this victory, there was little formal legalization and development of the colonies in the 1950s.

During the 1950s Calcutta registered the physical impact of each refugee wave because it was a major transit point and to the displaced, still a locus of opportunity. Also, the city was where policy decisions were debated. The large refugee presence in Calcutta acted as a catalyst for conflicts between the Government and opposition parties. The major issues of the day were the failure to solve the 'national problem' of refugee rehabilitation; the manipulation of refugees for political gain; allegations that the Central Government's rehabilitation policies discriminated against Bengali refugees as opposed to West Pakistani migrants, and the rehabilitation of Muslims displaced within the state by communal events.

As far as the refugees' own response was concerned, Calcutta was their obvious choice of arena for registering their dissatisfaction with official policies, through demonstrations and mass rallies. A powerful image was born from these protests: a haggard refugee woman marching in the street with a baby on her hip.

The leaders of the displaced demanded involvement in planning their own rehabilitation and were often absorbed into the refugee 'fronts' of political parties. They pointed out the defects in the policies being followed, and of how alleged fraud and hostility among the refugees were inevitable strategies of survival. They complained about their lack of formal title to land in their new

settlements, to the slow pace of development work in the colonies, and the delay and paucity in disbursing loans.

The ultimate protest lay in desertion from camps and rehabilitation sites. Such doubly-displaced persons crowded Haora and Shealdah stations and the streets in the 1950s, seeking alternatives. Government officials agreed with the criticism of faulty planning, over-hasty disposal, poor selection of sites and confusion between agricultural and non-agricultural schemes. All these led to a higher rate of desertion from Government-sponsored colonies than from private settlements.

At the end of 1958-59, the Government reported that it had spent 48.5 crores on the non-camp refugees and only 18 crores on those in its own camps. Looking back at the 1950s, it might be argued that more 'old migrants' rebuilt their lives successfully, with or without assistance, than refugees belonging to later waves. Resettlement in West Bengal and Calcutta since the 1960s was, by definition, self-settlement, and shrinking resources tended to make marginalization a persistent condition for 'new migrants'.

Old, New and Unrecognized Migrants: The 1960s to the Present

The last three decades have seen a crucial change in the Union Government's rehabilitation policy as regards West Bengal. The Government insisted on viewing the rehabilitation programme within the state as 'residual', concentrating instead on rehabilitation planning in other states, as in the Dandakaranya Project. It was even suggested that the Ministry of Rehabilitation should be wound up, but this was aborted by fresh migrations in the 1960s and early 1970s.

A related development was the gradual immiserization of the state and, with it, the city of Calcutta. The unresolved problems of the East Bengal refugees was seen as a fundamental cause of socio-economic decline and political unrest. A third feature was the growing rift between the Union and State Governments over the quantum and control of funds needed for the 'residual' task of rehabilitation. The rift was made obvious when the State Government, in the early 1970s, prepared a 'Master Plan for Economic Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal'. This



suggested that the benefits (such as they were) granted to the 'old' migrants should be extended to the 'new' in the interests of the entire population of West Bengal. It advocated the conferment of title to land, the remission of certain loans, regularization and uplift of urban squatter colonies and more employment opportunities. The price tag was Rs 150 crore. The Government of India scaled this down to Rs 72.71 crore.

The coming of the Left Front Government in 1977 gave rise to hope. 'New migrants' in Dandakaranya deserted camp and sought to establish themselves on reclaimed land in the Sundarbans. They were soon thwarted, while the refugees in general realized that they still had a long battle ahead, given the magnitude of the problem and West Bengal's narrow resource base.

The Left Front's Refugee Rehabilitation Committee, after a new field survey, proposed a comprehensive rehabilitation-cum-development plan of Rs 750 crore in 1980-81. The plan emphasized several programmes currently under way, such as recognition of the post-1950 squatter colonies (of which a list of 942, urban and rural, is thought to be incomplete); granting of titles to homestead and agricultural land; and a final phase of assistance for a sizeable group of people at ex-camp sites, who had refused to leave the camps for Dandakaranya in 1961 even after all facilities, including water and electricity, had been cut off.

The plan's other major emphasis was on a new programme for economic rehabilitation of the displaced within the state. According to its assessment, earlier such schemes, both agricultural and industrial, had failed to achieve the desired effect: this included the creation of the Rehabilitation Industries Corporation and of

industrial estates in Greater Calcutta. As a result, 56 lakhs of displaced persons were living below the poverty line. The solution proposed was to utilize the pool of skilled labour created among these people by the Union Government's training programmes to form the nucleus of an expanding small-scale and cottage industries sector.

The plan is currently being implemented to a time-bound schedule; but meanwhile the Parliamentary Estimates Committee (1988-89) has advised the Rehabilitation Division of the Union Home Ministry to complete the rehabilitation of East Bengali migrant in a new spirit of urgency.

Calcutta's tercentenary will be seen by people – locals, outsiders, those who love the city and those who are repelled by it – as a time for taking stock. Its image of an overcrowded and economically depressed city must be assessed in the light of its unique history as a city of migrants and refugees. The problems of the refugee and non-refugee populations in the city have aggravated each other over the years. But there are abundant indications that the creative energy which powered the rehabilitation efforts of refugees during every wave have not been dissipated: among prosperous communities in the middle-class colonies of south Calcutta; slums along the Eastern Bypass where livings are earned by unpicking threads from rubber tyres; East Bengali traders doing business in 'Tangail saris'; refugee women from the rural areas of the Calcutta Metropolitan District riding local trains to work as daily help in city households. It is also a credit to the receptivity and adaptability of the host population. The lives of all these toilers, refugee and non-refugee, are bound together in the quest to realize Calcutta's full potential as a city of opportunity.





THE INHERITORS: SLUM AND PAVEMENT LIFE IN CALCUTTA



Raghab Bandyopadhyay

In the mid-1970s, a hoarding appeared in Calcutta. It showed a rickshaw-puller. The caption read, 'Whom do you belong to, Calcutta?'

A difficult question. The ambiguous answer was, 'To him who cares for you.'

Who cares for Calcutta? Who really looks after the city, keeps it moving, alive?

Like an apple cleft in two, the city has two faces, two identities. There is no geographical division: the boundary wall of a luxury high-rise may back up a row of lean-tos for the homeless. Hence the division in spirit too is not apparent and indeed not total. The city is exceptionally marked by compassion, indulgence, absorption. But there is a deeper contradiction, a cycle of acceptance and repulsion, harbouring and exile. Men, women and children swarm into every empty space – parks, porches, pavements, vacant plots. They line the canals and railway tracks. Calcutta takes them all to herself, some would say they have taken over Calcutta. Yet they are haunted by the spectre of evicting policemen wielding their sticks. How can the forces of order not brandish a stick at them from time to time?

In the 1980s, a middle-class revolution has silently seized Calcutta. There is a new trend towards sporadic beautification, preservation of old monuments, and a certain streamlining, sophistication and even luxury in middle-class homes. With this goes a new concern for the

environment. All this is designed to foster one particular aspect of the myth of Calcutta. But another compelling – if equally mythicized – aspect remains. It is one thing to raise enlightened slogans of 'Health and shelter for all', another to implement them in the teeth of reality or even to insulate the affluent classes from that reality. Hence the challenge implicitly thrown out to the rickshaw-puller in the hoarding: Can 'they' be with 'us'? If not, they had better bow out.

Of course they will not bow out. Rather, they are making the city their own, in ever greater numbers. They live and multiply more abundantly than they die; they replenish their numbers from the great womb of village India. Some have no room to live in; others – one-third of the city's population – crowd into one-room slum tenements and sleep at two levels, upon and below the same bedstead. They are sickly, malnourished, and sometimes utterly destitute. But they live, and only in Calcutta could they find life. They destroy faith; they inspire faith.

I

In this essay, I shall talk about the people who, for the benefit of the upper classes of Calcutta, undertake the most imperative, taxing yet lowly occupations. Their work and their lives



are dictated on the one hand by the urge to live, on the other by their social situation.

Let us begin from a region close to Calcutta's eastern midden-heap: the Tiljala, Tangra and Tapsia area. It is chiefly inhabited by people of a particular occupation and caste-group: Harijan leather-workers. It is cut off from Calcutta's heartland by a huge drainage channel, through which flows the city's waste water and sewage. In the other direction, it is equally divorced from rural greenery by mountains of garbage. It belongs to neither the city nor the countryside. Its labouring inhabitants too seem to be living in a no-man's land.

These people began their lives, without exception, in the villages. They came here lured by the city's gold, and this was the end of their rainbow. They have adopted a curious mixed, half-urban life-style. They illustrate a special history and a special social mobility.

Sixteen out of every hundred Indians are Harijans. They number 100 million. Among them are the Chamars, whose Calcutta members may be considered as a distinct subgroup. These Calcutta Chamars completed a hundred years of their existence recently. They have lived out this century quietly in this region. They provide a classic model for those depressed rural communities to whom Calcutta is a promised land, a release from the twin tyrannies of poverty and the caste system.

Already in 1911, the Census Superintendent had observed that only 45 per cent of Calcutta's inhabitants were native Bengalis. Today as well, nearly half its people are migrants from Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh. A 1966 survey showed that non-Bengali workers made up 71 per cent of the labour force in the jute mills, 58 per cent in the textile mills and 73 per cent in the iron and steel plants. In the state's industries as a whole, the proportion was 60 per cent. Since then, the number of migrants has declined. (This may please the chauvinist, but actually underscores the lack of significant industrial expansion.) The Calcutta Chamars provide an extreme instance of the urges driving poor villagers from the Hindi heartland towards the city in Bengal.

'I am of low caste, I was born in vain.' Perhaps the Chamars came to Calcutta nursing this lament of the untouchable poet Sant Ravi Das. It has gradually been effaced by generations of labour as tanners, artisans and finally factory workers. But to begin with, they had to



consider their security as vulnerable Harijans: 11.1 A backyard tannery hence they congregated with the Doms, Dosads, Mehtars and Kehars who already lived in that forgotten quarter. In the caste-ridden village society, they could never have formed a majority: they gained this status in their new homes, despite the open drains, latrines, pigsties, chimney smoke and pungent smell of chemicals. More, they gained standing as an organized labour force. They were grateful for these not inconsiderable mercies.

A tannery is a factory, but it is after all a leather factory. The workers were following their old village occupation. Nor did they step out of the village social life: their circle remained that of uncles, cousins, clansmen and fellow-villagers. But in the Hindi-belt villages, they had seen little of party flags, slogans, new phrases and new demands; if they had, they had thought them an upper-class prerogative. From Tiljala to Beliaghata, the red flag was planted a long time ago. The Chamars saw before their eyes the struggle of the workers in the Bengal Potteries, rubber works and paint works. They picked up a few lessons of their own.

Mahatma Gandhi had given untouchables the mass dignity of 'Harijans', children of God. The Constitution of free India gave them special rights and privileges. These have as yet borne fruit only on a limited scale. Calcutta gave the Chamars some new rights, a new awareness, not by official fiat but through



struggle and experience. These rights too have not been fully exercised. Their leaders are still drawn largely from the upper castes: only a few have risen from their own ranks, like Ramvilas Ram, possibly the first Chamar leader of Tiljala. He was killed by his opponents.

Hence even the Calcutta Harijan is torn between two identities: he is a labourer, but he is a Harijan. He is free of the petty persecution of the village; but he is immeasurably removed from the mainstream of urban life and culture. His social life is confined to the narrow lanes of Dhapa, Tangra, Tapsia and Tiljala. Beyond them, he is a faceless shadow in the crowd.

Bansi Ram is a forty-year-old Chamar. He works as a *badli* or substitute hand in a tannery at Tiljala. His earliest memories are of the Bihar Earthquake of 1934: horror, ruin and death, jets of water and black sand spouting from the ground once the great tremor was over. But it is a communal, not a personal memory: Bansi Ram had not been born in 1934. It is perhaps a Harijan myth of a calamity so great as to level the rich and the poor.

The rich had means to survive the horror; the Chamars did not. The sheer urge to live drove Bansi's father Ramdas Ram to Calcutta. A 1911 survey showed that most Chamars in the Central Provinces earned their living as unskilled labourers, porters, palanquin bearers, boatmen, carters, herdsmen, domestic servants, small traders and beggars. The earthquake brought a devastating release from this cycle of pursuits: the adventure of a journey by mail train to a daunting El Dorado.

The Park Circus Maidan is the only open space to ventilate this sector of Calcutta. Beyond it there are railway lines; and then yards hung with cow and buffalo carcasses, whole hides stuffed with sawdust. The hair of the dead animals lies strewn like a carpet. Here, among the tin and tiled roofs, the smoke, dust and chemicals, generations of Chamars live out their working lives.

This area can be divided into a number of blocks. One of them is no 159 Tiljala Road. At least 80 per cent of its residents have no fixed jobs. Neither the Census Report nor the voters' list can give us their true number: it may swell by nearly 50 per cent at certain times of the year. As the plight of poor men worsens in rural Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the human tide flows more and more strongly into Tangra and Tiljala. They are not all Chamars; but all are

poor, all are Harijans. Earlier, much of the flow was diverted to the industrial zone of Haora; but Haora has now lost its glory.

The most reliable estimate would put the population of no 159 at 15,000. Needless to say, it does not have room for them all. They spill out onto the strip of land beside the railway tracks. They also accommodate themselves by sleeping in shifts: this multiplies the effective capacity of a hovel by three or four times. Needless to say too, the four tubewells and few scattered latrines are pitifully inadequate. The womenfolk usually remain in the villages: no 159 is a male domain. There are many children, but they too are nearly all boys.

Over east Calcutta, such archipelagos of hutments jostle among looming factories. Through them runs a maze of lanes; but there are only three or four main entrances. The Tangra area starts from the Baishali cinema. Near the entrance lies 36/1/1 Tangra Road, a cluster of a dozen or so Chamar huts.

Here live Ashrafi Ram, Kamal Das, Ramsundar Ram. Ramji Ram lived here as well, but he was finished off by illicit liquor in 1984, after forty-five years at the address: he arrived in 1939 from Darbhanga District in Bihar. His father Mangu Ram came before him: the family's Calcutta links go back to 1902. Thanks to this old tenancy, Ramji's brother-clansmen can keep coming to Calcutta even today. To take fresh possession of one of these hovels would involve a *salami* of Rs 2,000. Mangu Ram's family hasn't got that kind of money.

Every night in this little community, the old village is brought to mind in rustic songs sung to the *dholak*, cymbals and leather *dampha*. On holiday mornings, people sit around and drink toddy. A few religious men, devotees of Kabir like Kamal Das, avoid the drinking-sessions; but they number only a handful.

The ties of blood, clan and village, cousin and kin, are strong here. So is the sway of quacks, witch-doctors and spirit-raisers. A breed of minstrel called the *beas* has also been brought over from the village to recite the verses of Sant Ravi Das and sing traditional melodies. More demotic songs like *kawwali* and *khemta* are also in demand.

Alongside these, on holidays, panchayats assemble for their deliberations. On holidays too, people set out from Tangra to arrange a match for their offspring in Sodepur or Kasba,

Mother Teresa

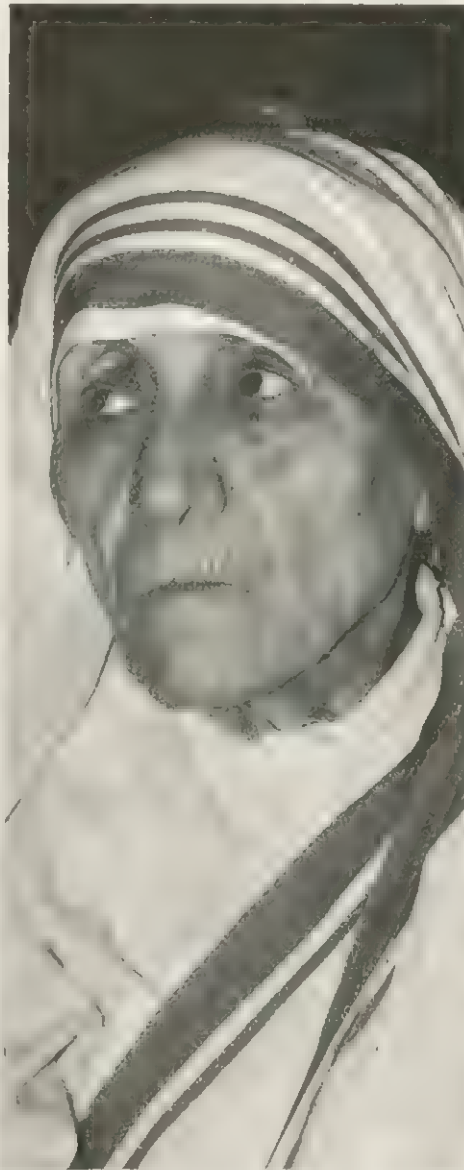
The lives of Calcutta's poor have come to be linked closely with the name of Mother Teresa, though the association is often made in a spirit far removed from the Mother's own endless unforced love of suffering man. Born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu in Skopje, Yugoslavia of Albanian parents in 1910, Mother Teresa arrived in Calcutta in 1928. While teaching at the Loreto Convent in Entali, the slums outside the school walls engaged her more and more, and on 10 September 1946 came the 'day of decision'. In mid-1948 she sought permission from her Order to leave the school to serve the city's poor.

With a nurse's training and a total store of five rupees, she found a home in an obscure house in Entali, and opened a school in nearby Motijhil Bustee. She also began to tend the sick and suffering in streets and slums, and in 1952 set up Nirmal Hriday (The Pure Heart), her home for dying destitutes, in an abandoned dharamshala in Kalighat. Meanwhile, some dozen young women of Calcutta had come to join her. In 1950, she founded the Missionaries of Charity.

At a time when all missionary orders are dwindling, the Missionaries of Charity find more and more aspirants every year. The nuns in their blue-bordered white sarees are a familiar sight in Calcutta, but the order has homes and institutions virtually all over the world; and by common consent, the spirit of love and service has not been impaired by either institutional growth or the Mother's own fame – the last crowned by the award of the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1979. The Order has 418 centres around the world. In Calcutta, the most prominent, besides the original Nirmal Hriday, are Shishu Bhāban, a children's home; Prem Dan for leprosy patients; and Shanti Dan for drug addicts.

But the soul of Mother Teresa's work does not lie in these material endeavours;

however immense, they are at best marginal to the amelioration of urban poverty. The great task that she has declaredly set herself is to change men's hearts and attitudes – in her own words, 'to help them love one another as God loves each one of them'. St. Paul defined such charity long ago: 'Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, ... and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.'



where there are settlements of their caste brethren. Or they may have set aside the day to resolve a dispute over their poor property. All in all, there is a perceptible desire to hold on to the village way of life, or indeed turn their corner of the city into the village of their dreams.

Although the Calcutta Chamars are among the city's 24 lakh slum-dwellers, they have benefited less than others from the efforts of the CMDA. They still live out their monsoons among lanes knee-deep in mud, thick with garbage, chemicals and gobbets of flesh and hide. Inevitably each monsoon, the area becomes a seedbed for enteric fever and malaria, with (even now) some sporadic cases of cholera.

The Calcutta Chamars came to terms with the city through their struggle to live; and when all is said and done, the vigour of that struggle still infuses their lives through a thousand deprivations and afflictions. Calcutta has gifted

to them the truth that life can mean a little more than fatalism, helplessness and defeat.

A little outside the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration, between Krishnanagar and Bara Jagulia, stands the village of Birahi. Among its inhabitants are some 200 Chamars, hailing from Ballia District in UP via a sojourn in former East Pakistan. I once went there to see a Chamar family. I had heard they had built a concrete house, and wished to see if it was true: it was. A small pukka house is not much to boast of; but it was a symbol of radical change. Back home, even if they acquired the means to build one, they would not have the 'right': it was a dream that Ravi Das and Banshi Ram carried in their hearts. The Chamar of Birahi had realized that dream: his success was a focal point of hope. The Calcutta Chamar has gained a new life, free of the stigma of his caste: he need not shun his own shadow. Who can doubt that one day he will stand up and declare, 'Calcutta is mine'?

11.3 *An unimproved slum*



II

From March to June 1987, the CMDA carried out a survey of the city's pavement-dwellers. The first computation, made in March, put their number at 55,571.

The figure is roughly reliable, but only roughly. To understand the pavement life of Calcutta, we cannot go by numbers and statistics – average income, health data and so on. We must try to grasp the varied life-styles, the fierce urge to live, the resort to certain basic, almost primordial relationships.

The leather-workers we met in the last section had many cruel problems, the chief being health and shelter. The same basic situation obtains in the tailors' slums of Metiabruz, the small industries along Belilious Road in Haora, and other settlements of the unorganized labour force. They lack the secure employment of large-scale organized industry; but except in cases of extreme recession (as in

parts of Haora today) they are more or less assured of work. They have fixed abodes and, even if back in their village, a settled family life.

But the pavement-dweller is a truly 'unaccommodated man'. He has no special skill by which to earn a living: sheer physical labour is his only asset. Nearly all his kind can tell a tale of destitution, of natural or personal calamity, sickness and death. Once, perhaps, they worked on the land, wove baskets, put up fences, did whatever else the landless poor can do in the countryside. Nearly all lived below the poverty line – the common consequence of which was to leave one day for the big city.

In this way, over 55,000 people have landed in Calcutta. They are not refugees, nor are they a respectable work-force. Their arrival in the city initially benumbs them with a sense of helpless inferiority: 'We don't know any trade.' Their forefathers in the villages might have been weavers, smiths, barbers or washermen.

What then do they do? In an article in the

11.4 *An improved slum*





Economic and Political Weekly of 4 June 1988, N.V. Jagannathan and Animesh Halder listed the occupations of Calcutta's pavement-dwellers as presented in Table 1.

An analysis of the table suggests two main types of occupation: unskilled labour (the major group) and small-scale trade. Transport workers like rickshaw and handcart-pullers (who comprise 23 per cent of all pavement-dwellers) should be placed in the first group. There is also a small sector of the minor self-employed, like shoe-shine men, masseurs and sandwich men.

The particular stretch of pavement that each will obtain is determined by his occupation. They have to consider their security, the risk of theft, the threat of eviction by the police. The women are nearly all domestic servants, so they must live within easy distance of the houses where they work. Because physical energy is their only stock-in-trade, they conserve it with special care – doubly so because of their frequent malnutrition.

The pavement-dwellers have a remarkable news-collection service. They know when and where the next eviction drive will be held; where there is a job going; where some charitable trust may be giving out free food. Information about living places is obviously crucial: no one knows better than the pavement-dweller how many open porches and

TABLE 1

Occupational Categories	Percentage Share	Weekly Income	Working Hours (per day)	Distance Coverage for Occupational Activities	Willingness to Pay (in Rupees per head per day) for New Shelter
Porters	20	96	8	3	0.62
Hand cart-pullers	10	98	8	5	0.75
Daily casual-labourers	10	84	7	4	0.67
Rickshaw pullers	13	79	8	5	0.75
Hawkers	7	75	8	2	0.68
Drivers	1	109	9	-	1.03
Domestic servants	3	50	7	1	0.52
Beggars	8	30	6	2	0.42
Helper	7	80	9	2	0.59
Ragpickers	2	67	8	4	0.48
Shop assistants	2	61	9	1	0.60
Sweepers	2	114	8	2	0.54
Tea-shop-keepers	2	95	10	0	0.84
Vegetable-vendors	3	80	8	0	0.88
Others	10	87	8	-	-
All	100	85	8	3	0.69

hanging balconies there are on every Calcutta street. Obviously too, the site is determined by its earning potential. Large markets and stations, factory areas and the docks all afford jobs as day-labourers, hence the areas around them are prime camping-grounds. Not all 'pavement-dwellers' actually live on the pavement; but all of them lack the means and incentive to build a structure to live in. This is what distinguishes the pavement-dweller, generically speaking, from the more settled slum-dweller.

Hence too, while slum-dwellers fall within the purview of development projects, and are sometimes major beneficiaries, the floating poor on the streets commonly suffer in the cause of urban development. The root problem lies in their poverty. They lack the means to pay for, or even contribute towards, officially admissible housing. At the same time, the city lacks the open space to resettle them in their own makeshift manner, leaving the pavements and other premises free. Hence the streets of Calcutta remain a crowded haven for nomadic and uprooted men, chiefly landless labourers who flock to the city like migratory birds when they find no work in the villages. When 55,571 human beings gather in this way, the problem cannot be ignored. To let them be is unacceptable; to provide shelter for the endless flow, a virtually impossible task.

III

In 1983-84, Unnayan, a social service organization specially concerned with housing and shelter, made a survey of the shanty-dwellers at eight points along the city's canals and open arterial sewers. The survey yielded the figures presented in Table 2.

Another survey in March-May 1984 counted 6,285 families at some twenty-five points along the route of the Circular Railway coming up now. They were living in shanties rigged up from polythene, sacking and mud - all of them unauthorized encroachments in the eyes of the law.

As in so many other places, the older inhabitants of these trackside settlements came chiefly from erstwhile East Pakistan. The next biggest number was from the villages of 24-Parganas. Land was an economic commodity even in this sorry commonwealth of shanties. The East Bengal refugees gave up

slivers of their territory to the migrants from West Bengal villages, in return for regular rent or a lump sum of money. Of dwellers outside these two groups, 90 per cent were poor Bihari Harijans.

Their chief occupations were those of daily-wage labourers, domestic servants, sweepers, hawkers and small traders or shopkeepers, with a family income ranging between Rs 200 and Rs 500 a month, and an average of four to six members per family. (Interestingly, all the residential units were familial in structure.) Their places of work were generally within 2 kilometres of their homes: their existence was bound by the twin prospects of work and

Facing Page :

11.5 & 11.6

The contrast :

subsistence on the

pavement and

organized family life in

a slum

Above :

11.7 *A place to sleep*

Below :

11.8 *A street barber*



TABLE 2

Canal	Estimated number of Hutments/ Households	Estimated Population
1. Bagjola canal	4,500	22,500
2. Circular canal	1,800	9,000
3. New cut canal	750	3,750
4. Palmer Bazar Storm water canal (Moila Khal)	500	2,500
5. Baliganj Storm water canal (Tapsia Khal)	180	900
6. Panchannagram Canal	370	1,850
7. Tolly's Nulla	1,240	6,200
8. Boat canal	150	750
	9,490	47,450
	or say 9,500 households	or say 48,000 people

shelter, a rudimentary circle of primary needs, just as in their earlier incarnation as landless yet landbound rural labourers. The pavement-dweller lives in constant uncertainty as to both work and shelter. Here, to secure the latter need, indigent people were spending up to 10 per cent of their meagre income.

IV

Though 'slum' and *bustee* are commonly used as synonyms, they have different legal implications. The West Bengal Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act of 1972 defines a 'slum area' as one with 'conditions ... injurious to public health or safety or to the health, hygiene or morals of the inhabitants of such area'. Above 50 per cent of the city's settlements can be described as 'slums' by this definition. The *bustee*, on the contrary, is defined not by conditions of life in this way but by the physical nature of its structures. According to the Calcutta Municipal Act of 1951 as amended, *Bustee* means an area containing land occupied by, or for the purposes of, any collection of huts standing on a plot of land not less than seven hundred square metres in area. A 'hut' in turn is defined as 'any building, no substantial part of which .. is constructed of masonry, reinforced concrete, steel, iron or other metal.' There are at least 2,000 *bustees* so defined listed in the Calcutta Municipal Area; counting Haora, the total

exceeds 3,500, with some 20 lakh occupants. In the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration as a whole, the number of *bustee*-dwellers comes to more than 30 lakh.

Each square kilometre of Calcutta is occupied by 28,571 people. 51 per cent of them live in *kutchha* dwellings (i.e., without a concrete roof). The bottom 25 per cent of city-dwellers occupy only 7 per cent of the land. This disproportion is matched by strange anomalies and paradoxes that bedevil any attempt at uplift. The Government or some social organization might improve a slum, arrange for water supply, sanitation or electricity. The slum landlord at once puts up his rent, and the intended beneficiaries of the development are forced to leave their homes. Their place is taken by the slightly better-off: a clerk, schoolmaster or other member of the lower middle class. The struggle for existence takes place on many fronts: these conflict and compete, and cannot be plotted on a straight line.

Calcutta's poor have also been racked by wars, famines, riots and the Partition of India. Each such calamity threatened the very fabric of their existence, making their survival truly a day-to-day affair. This has never been adequately documented. The sufferers are inarticulate, almost by definition, and the middle class treats these matters externally and patronizingly. We have no epic of the city's poor. Nor are we aware how much past events have shaped their present and future. Bombs fell during the War upon the slums around the Khidirpur Docks. Those who died in communal riots were nearly always slum-dwellers.

Commerce and industry provided Calcutta with its *raison d'être*. These are now marking time: the city no longer affords endless prospects of work. Yet its army of job-seekers is swelling endlessly: refugees, immigrants, the uprooted rural poor from a vast tract of India. This ground-swell is breaking upon the urban rubble of slums, shanties and pavement shelters.

It would be frivolous and inhuman to regard this tide of humanity simply as a grim memorial to the city's time-worn Industrial Revolution. How do these men and women themselves view Calcutta? Do they view it at all? Or only sleepwalk through it towards an impossible land of dreams?

In his book *Calcutta and Rural Bengal: Small*



Sector Symbiosis, A.N. Basu gives an account of slum-based industries, based on a survey of 649 units. These had grown up entirely within the slums: in most cases, the owner was himself a slum-dweller, while sometimes the unit was basically manned by a single family, hiring labour from outside as required. In all, these 649 units provided employment to 4,446 persons.

The greatest number of units dealt in wood and machinery. There were also hosiery, printing presses, leather works, binderies, rubber recycling units and even some making paper bags. These places are a major resort of female and child labour. In the great world beyond the slum, such workers face many types of danger and exploitation. In these units within their own community, the women feel more secure even if they are paid less, while the children are treated with a sort of rough kindness.

It may be thought that one day, even the most destitute slum-dweller might combine with the relatively affluent men who run such small industries: perhaps they can all grow self-reliant. While such hopes seem madly optimistic, the slums themselves testify to the wide constructive force of the urge for survival. For the present, the compelling truth is that the people in Calcutta's slums and shanties are primordially committed to the cause of life and the need to live.

V

There is a two-way traffic between the slum and the pavement. Uprooted people from the villages resort to the pavements; so do drop-outs from the city's own slums who have, perhaps, become unable to pay the fifty-rupee rent. Conversely, a rickshaw puller from the pavements might work his way up to a slum tenement. We shall probably find in such a case that his wife works as charwoman in four or five houses, and the children also earn their mites. The whole family works from morning to night to ensure this security.

However, there is one point common to *bustee*, 'slum' and 'shanty-town': they expand only horizontally, not vertically. There is a limit to such expansion. Calcutta has already




become Greater Calcutta, an Urban Agglomeration, a Metropolitan District: it cannot embrace the whole country. Yet the country is driving it down that impossible road. Cities all over the world have commonly grown up at the expense of the country; Calcutta is no exception. But uniquely in Calcutta, the country keeps coming to its door and saying, successfully, 'Take me in.'


In the last two decades, the rate of influx has declined somewhat: partly because the city's economy and job prospects have declined, but partly because the villages have themselves seen the light of development. The slums too have acquired water, drainage, electricity, schools – inadequately but not imperceptibly. Beleaguered Calcutta is rising to save itself, and save its innumerable children. It must settle once for all who its true inheritors are to be.

Above
11.9 A child leather-worker in East Calcutta

Below :
11.10 Shanties and high-rise blocks



CALCUTTA'S ECONOMY 1918-1970 THE FALL FROM GRACE



Omkar Goswami

Given the present realities of life in Calcutta, there is a strong temptation to divide the city's history into two grand epochs – the glorious past and the miserable present – and then search for a watershed to explain the fall from grace. One hears of many such watersheds. To aged grandparents the rot set in with the demise of the Raj and the departure of the sahibs. For others it was the death of Dr Bidhan Ray. For thousands of latent Bengali nationalists, the migrants from other states were the root of all evil. To others the beginning of the end was the day Calcutta Corporation stopped watering the roads. To the old *ghati* (native West Bengali) residents it was the refugees from the east. To yet others the Leftists are the real culprits.

Although such approaches have the advantage of dramatic simplicity, they tend to ignore the important continuities in the life of any large city. Moreover, the view that Calcutta was once a city of palaces and is now a city of slums belies both the actual history of the city and certain universal trends in urban stagnation and decay. It confers an exceptional status to Calcutta that the facts do not warrant.

Yet even the most loyal supporters of the city cannot wish away the decline of its economic conditions, civic amenities and municipal governance. What are the economic reasons for this decline? To what extent can one trace the present problems of the city to the colonial

and early post-Independence eras? Given the economic position of Calcutta's hinterland and the state of the city in the days of the Raj (by which I refer to the city as a whole and not the 'city of palaces' that we often wistfully evoke), was there anything exceptional about the rate of deterioration? Could it have been at all possible to arrest the decline? Most fundamentally: for whom or from what perspective should we call it a decline at all?

In December 1911 the King Emperor announced the transfer of India's capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Although the move hurt Bengali sentiment and European mercantile egos, it made no difference to the economic supremacy of Calcutta. Three of the four largest mining and manufacturing activities of colonial India – jute mills, collieries and tea – were concentrated wholly in eastern India with Calcutta as the hub. At the end of World War I, Bengal accounted for 43 per cent of the rupee capital of all joint stock companies in India and 73 per cent of the paid-up capital of the sterling firms. Bombay, the competing city, was far behind, commanding 40 and 19 per cent respectively in these two areas.

At the end of World War I the industrial wealth of eastern India was firmly under the control of British mercantile companies and managing agencies. More than 95 per cent of the joint-stock tea companies had only British directors. All the fifty jute mill companies were



under British managing agencies and 97 per cent of the directors were Britons. Of the larger collieries, set up as joint-stock entities, 89 per cent were controlled by British managing agencies.

The last decades of the colonial era saw four broad changes in the structure of industrial control. The first was a rapid and remarkable transformation of many Marwaris from traders and money-lenders to entrepreneurs. The Marwaris had been an integral part of inland trade and money-lending in eastern India from the early nineteenth century. From the mid-1920s, many Marwari families started investing a part of the enormous trading and speculative profits made before and during the War in jute mills and collieries. By December 1930, 60 per cent of the jute-mill companies and 45 per cent of the joint-stock collieries had Marwaris as directors. In 1948, the figures had risen to 85 per cent and 82 per cent respectively. Within a decade of Independence, the Marwaris had effectively captured these two hitherto British-controlled industries. By the 1960s, the Birlas, Goenkas, Bajorias, Bangurs, Kanorias, Kedias, Jalans, Dalmias, Poddars, Jhunjhunwalas and Jajpurias had become the new economic elite of Calcutta.

Another trend that became increasingly apparent during the late colonial era was the decline of the old British managing agencies. This was largely due to gross mismanagement by the British, the lack of diversification and, of course, the decline in imperial power. Although a few powerful managing agencies such as Andrew Yule, Bird, Jardine and the Inchcape group retained substantial interests until the 1960s, many others lost out before Independence and were taken over by the Marwaris in the 1950s. Thus, Duncan Brothers was bought out by Keshavprasad Goenka, McLeod by Kanoria, Begg Dunlop by Bajoria, Kettlewell Bullen by Bangur, and Anderson Wright by Kedia.

Accompanying these trends were two others, one minor and another major. The relatively minor trend was the rise and subsequent fall of a small group of Bengali entrepreneurs. Curzon's partition of Bengal and the slogans of economic nationalism raised by pioneers like Praphullachandra Ray prompted many Bengali families to set up industries producing relatively advanced goods such as pharmaceuticals, vaccines, soap and cosmetics,

or electric bulbs and fans. These firms – notably Bengal Chemicals, Bengal Immunity, Calcutta Chemicals, Bengal Lamps and Calcutta Fans – prospered for a while but gradually lost their economic vitality or petered out altogether. This was the second death of Bengali entrepreneurship – the first occurring in the 1840s with the failure of the Union Bank and the subsequent collapse of many Bengali firms, most notable being Dwarakanath Thakur's Carr, Tagore and Company.

The more important development was the emergence of the multinational firms or 'India Limited' companies, which, with the Marwari entrepreneurs, soon came to control whatever was worth controlling in eastern India. By the mid-1950s these multinationals had entered almost all major industries from petroleum, industrial gases and hydrogenated vegetable oils to cigarettes, soap, toothpaste and packaged tea. They soon became the market leaders for many products. Many of these firms had their Indian headquarters in Calcutta: Babcock and Wilcox (boilers), Braithwaite (engineering), Brooke Bond and Lipton (packaged tea), Chloride (batteries), Dunlop (rubber and tyres), GEC (electrical equipment), Guest Keen Williams (railway equipment), ICI (chemicals and alkali), Imperial Tobacco (cigarettes and tobacco), Indian Oxygen (industrial gases), Jenson and Nicholson (paints), Metal Box (containers), Westinghouse Saxby and Farmer (railway equipment), to name a few.

However important these developments might be, they did not really affect the economic life of Calcutta one way or the other, except to redistribute profit incomes across a new set of elites. Whatever be the changes in industrial ownership or control, the period 1938-1947 saw a steady growth in the real net income generated by east India's staple industries – jute, coal and tea. At constant 1938-39 prices, net income from minerals (of which coal accounted for the lion's share) grew at a compound trend rate of 1.8 per cent per year from Rs 89 million to Rs 192 million. During the pre-Depression years (1911 to 1929) the real net income from the jute mills increased at a trend rate of 2.8 per cent per year. The Depression slowed down this growth, nevertheless, real net income continued to grow at 1.6 per cent per annum between 1931 and 1946. Tea plantations too witnessed steady





12.1 Inside a jute mill

growth. In other words, changes in the ownership and control patterns did not choke off the flow of income into Calcutta. If anything, the reverse took place.

Furthermore, from the 1930s India saw the development of newer industries such as iron and steel (started earlier), chemicals, paper, engineering, cement, sugar mills and others. Between 1924 and 1946 the real net income of these new industries grew from Rs 428 million (at 1938-39 prices) to Rs 1,587 million at a compound trend rate of 7.18 per cent per year. Since many of these units were registered in Calcutta, the city certainly enjoyed the benefits of this growth.

More important, Calcutta was the heart of a vast network of internal trade with spokes radiating from Barabazar, Hatkhola, Kashipur, Ultadanga, Chitpur and Kumartuli. Hardly any research has been done on the size of this bazaar economy, less still on its impact on Calcutta. A small example suffices to illustrate its importance. During 1940-45, the average annual value of raw jute inflow into Hatkhola and Kashipur was Rs 450 million, or around Rs 240 million at 1938-39 prices. Assuming a low trading profit of 10 per cent of the real value of sales, this translates to a real income of Rs 24 million per year on one trading activity alone. If one adds to this the plethora of trades – in clothing, gunny bags, sugar, edible oils and the like – as well as the profits made in money-lending and *fatka* (speculation), one gets an idea of the enormous amount of income that circulated to and from Calcutta.

To summarize, the performance of industry and internal trade in the colonial era could not have adversely affected the material life of Calcutta. The roots of Calcutta's decline lay elsewhere. For an adequate explanation one needs to examine the condition of the agrarian sector which, I shall argue, contributed to the first major problem of the city – migration from the countryside.

Calcutta had the dubious distinction of being the only economic drawing-point of three utterly impoverished zones: Orissa, Bihar and eastern UP. It is not surprising, therefore, that the overwhelming majority of workers in the jute mills were from Chhapra, Shahabad, Gaya, Patna, Munger, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Ghazipur, Ballia, Baleshwar and Cuttack. Most of these migrant workers lived in shanty-towns and *bustees* that dotted the mill area. In one small pocket (Kankinara-Jagatdal-Bhatpara-Naihati) there were more than 85,000 people packed into an area of 5.5 square miles. Those who could not get jobs at the factories ended up as lumpen proletariat literally living on, and off, the streets of Calcutta. Thus by 1931 Calcutta and its 24-Pargana suburbs had almost 390,000 migrants who accounted for 31 per cent of the city's population. Male migrants made up 38 per cent of Calcutta's total male population and 42 per cent of Haora's. Almost 60 per cent of the migrants came from the impoverished districts of Bihar and Orissa and another 27 per cent from UP. In the mill areas to the north of Calcutta the proportion of migrants was even higher: an average of 70 per cent with highs of 90 per cent and 80 per cent in Titagarh and Bhadreswar respectively.

From the late 1920s and early 1930s Calcutta and its suburbs started experiencing two types of migration. I have already referred to the first type, which was of an earlier vintage: the influx of non-Bengali labour who worked either in factories or as poorly paid *mazdoors* on the streets of Calcutta. This migration was substantial enough. Between 1921 and 1941 the population of the 'Calcutta Industrial Region', consisting of six cities and thirty towns, had grown at 3 per cent per year from 1.88 million to 4.63 million. But now another type of migration started taking place – that of poor agricultural labourers from rural Bengal who, if lucky, got jobs as domestic servants but generally made a living as lowly workers or beggars.

The second type of migration was closely related to the state of agrarian decay in Bengal. Between 1921 and 1941 the population of eastern India grew at 1.4 per cent per year. Coincident with this population explosion was the lack of growth of the agrarian hinterland. Between 1900 and 1947 the real per capita income in India's rural sector declined from the miserable to the ridiculous, from Rs 36.54 to Rs 31.57. In the eastern region, things were far worse. The Depression started in 1930 and continued until 1938, wreaking havoc on the prices of raw jute as well as paddy and culminating in a severe agrarian crisis. This in turn set off the second type of migration.

The second form of migration was serious enough even before the 1943 famine, to the point of affecting the daily lives of the city's elite. A municipal councillor complained that while in the earlier days begging was confined to the 'Black Town' of north Calcutta, by 1930 beggars had 'invaded' the European areas of Chourangi, Park Street and Camac Street, as well as the fashionable Indian suburbs to the south. These areas were now 'as full of beggars as of smoke and dung'. In fact a new phrase, 'beggar nuisance' soon became part of the officialese of the Calcutta Corporation. All rival groups within the Corporation were united in checking the spread of this new epidemic; and in 1938 the Bengal Vagrancy Bill was passed to arrest beggars and 'despatch them to suitable places'. Needless to say, given the state of the agrarian hinterland, the Bill was a dead letter.

These two types of migration led to changes in the population composition of the city. In 1931 migrants constituted nearly 31 per cent of the population of Calcutta and its suburbs; by 1941 this proportion had increased to 36. The upshot was a rapid proliferation of slums throughout Calcutta. Even in the days of the Raj the 'city of palaces' was no less a city of slums. In 1925 Tom Johnston, a Scottish Labour M.P., described a better off *bustee* in the Kankinara jute mill area:

These *bustees* are one storied blocks of mud plaster on wicker and matting on thatched roofs; [there are] no windows or chimneys ... the smoke simply oozes through the thatch if it cannot get out through the doorway The *bustees* have neither light nor water supply; the floors are earthen; sanitary arrangements there are none; and usually access ... can only be had along a narrow tunnel of filth where myriads of mosquitoes and flies breed and the stench is such that

one fears to strike a match lest the atmosphere, being combustible, should explode.

Kankinara was outside the Calcutta municipal limits; but the Calcutta *bustees* were just as grim. In the 1950s a socio-economic survey conducted by Calcutta University described an Ekbalpur *bustee* in these terms:

Most of our sample families live in *bustees*. They could be called houses only in an over-stretched sense of the term as they hardly protected their inmates from the rain Almost cent per cent of the *bustee* rooms are non-ventilated and receive little sunlight in any part of the day or fresh air in any part of the year Very few *bustees* possess water taps within their boundaries. In the majority of cases, municipal taps far away are used, the number of users ranging often from 200 upwards per tap At Ekbalpore Lane we found scores of people standing in front of a municipal latrine as they did not have latrines in their houses. These municipal latrines are cleaned no more than twice a month As to civic facilities like education, we are ashamed to record our findings. They are simply non-existent in these areas.

The surveyors wrote of the painfulness of collecting statistics of such miseries and not being able to do more than that.

This brings one to the question: What did Calcutta Corporation do about these *bustees*? In a word, very little: it had neither the resources nor, after some time, the inclination to do anything positive. Even at the best of times the Corporation was desperately pressed for cash. In the late 1920s it had a budget of Rs 30 million of which half went on wages and salaries, leaving a development budget of under Rs 13 per citizen per year – hardly adequate for supplying filtered water, electricity and sanitary facilities to the *bustees* that dotted the city.

Could the Corporation have raised additional resources? Theoretically, it could: all that was needed was to raise the municipal tax rates on urban property which was appreciating year after year. After all, in the 1930s the enormous incomes of Calcutta's 'aristocratic' houses did not come from their estates in agrarian Bengal, but from urban property in Calcutta. There could also have been a profit tax on the European managing agencies and the Marwari companies. However, passing such a bill required the assent of precisely those elites who stood to lose through higher taxes without gaining anything; and no political party that

controlled the Corporation could simultaneously alienate the Europeans, the Marwaris and the Bengali gentry and yet hope to remain in power.

Moreover, the Corporation did not have the administrative mandate necessary to initiate any meaningful *bustee* improvement programme. Chittaranjan Das certainly started out as Mayor in 1924 with an intention of reducing urban poverty and a belief that service to *daridra narayan* (the god of – or in – the poor) ought to be the ideal of all councillors. However, he soon found that the Corporation was forever dependent upon higher authorities for virtually everything. The city's electric supply was in the hands of a private British company which considered it unprofitable to extend facilities to slums; floating loans for slum clearance required prior approval from the Government of Bengal, which was never given; a scheme for setting up a municipal bank was blocked by the Government; and the more powerful rate-payers refused to allow any increases in taxes for expenditure on poor localities. Over time, the sordid power struggles between conflicting groups within the Corporation put an end to even the inclination to mitigate the conditions of the slum-dwellers. In particular, the decade-long struggle between Jatindramohan Sengupta on the one hand and Subhash Basu and Bidhan Ray on the other wrecked all possibilities of an efficient corporation for years to come. In the meantime, migration continued and *bustees* proliferated.

From the 1930s, Calcutta's agrarian hinterland suffered one shock after another – first the Depression, then the 1943 famine and finally the Partition. With each shock came an additional flow of migration swelling the population of a city that never had the resources to take proper care of its poor.

The famine brought with it a sight utterly unknown to Calcutta's urban elite – the stark face of rural poverty. For the first time they saw the depth of Bengal's agrarian crisis. Throughout 1943 destitutes went staggering through the city streets and the cry of '*Mago, ektu phan dao, ma!*' ('Give me a little rice-gruel, mother') became the commonest street-cry of even the wealthiest neighbourhoods. The response of the local government was pathetic. It opened a handful of gruel kitchens; it urged reporters to use the phrase 'sick destitutes' to describe starvation deaths; and H. S.

Suhrawardy, the Minister of Civil Supplies, exhorted the richer citizens to go forth and preach against gluttony as well as profiteering. When the flood of destitutes became too much for the elite, they passed the Bengal Destitute Persons Ordinance which empowered the police to round up 43,500 starving people and send them out of Calcutta. But thousands remained, and started a new life in water pipes, beside railway lines and on common land adjacent to the wealthier localities.

Within four years of the famine came the Partition, which brought an entirely new group of migrants – a vocal and educated Bengali middle class uprooted from East Pakistan. By 1951 the population of the Calcutta municipal area had risen to 2.7 million, of which 66.8 per cent were migrants and 26.9 per cent (over 685,000 people) were refugees from East Pakistan. The growth of the refugee population appears still more strikingly from the total population figures of certain other municipalities in the table below.

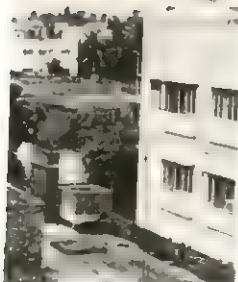
TABLE 1

	Tolly-ganj	South Sub-urban	South Dumdum	Baranagar	Barrackpur	Haora City
1931	24,476	39,499	18,471	37,050	14,413	224,873
1941	58,594	63,479	25,838	54,451	21,773	379,292
1951	149,817	104,055	61,391	77,126	42,639	433,630

Not surprisingly, the density of population sky-rocketed. Between 1941 and 1951, it increased by 20 per cent in Calcutta. In refugee-settled areas the growth was much more startling: 47 per cent in Barrackpur, 59 per cent in Baranagar, 63 per cent in Behala, 70 per cent in Maheshtala, 119 per cent in Dumdum and 141 per cent in Tollyganj.

The influx of refugees really brought the city's elite face-to-face with the urban problems that were brewing for a long time. In the first place, unlike previous migrants, who were clearly subalterns, the typical displaced families were vocal and considered it a political right to be gainfully re-settled in the city.

They belonged to the same culture background as the city's intelligentsia and demanded to be heard. Second, they settled in areas that were perilously close to affluent South Calcutta neighbourhoods: Behala and Chetla bordered Alipur, Kasba and Dhakuria were just next to Baliganj and Gariahat,

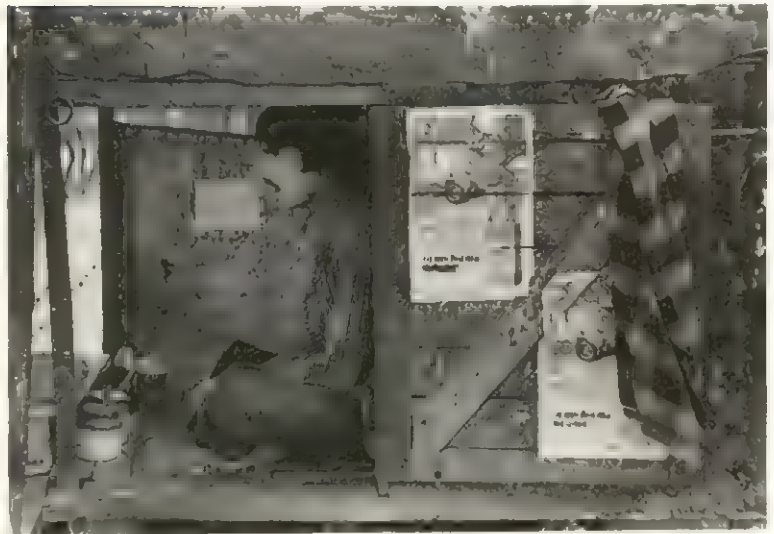


Jadabpur was not too far from the mansions of Southern Avenue, and the brown and white *sahibs* could no longer go to play golf without seeing the slums in Tollyganj. The new urban poor could not be put out of sight in the unmentionable parts of north Calcutta.

The era ended, therefore, with a number of urban problems. In general, the cities fared much better than the villages. Between 1900 and 1947 the real per capita income generated in the urban sector grew from Rs 139 to Rs 209, and the moving average of the income terms of trade (urban sector income deflated by agricultural sector prices) increased from an index of 44 in 1904-05 to 75 in 1946-47. But in this milieu of relative urban prosperity there festered enormous income disparities. Calcutta's rich citizens – those connected with jute, coal, tea, other industries, trade, money-lending and rentier income from urban property – did fabulously well for themselves. It is not surprising that large chunks of Baliganj, Rainey Park and Sunny Park, and Southern Avenue were developed during the 1930s and early 1940s. In fact, many of the mansions in Baliganj, Lansdowne Road (now Sharat Basu Road), Elgin Road (now Lala Lajpat Rai Sarani), Bhabanipur and Alipur were built by the city's Bengali and new Marwari elite who wished to move from the dirtier sections of north Calcutta to the more fashionable areas in the south.

Yet, at the same time, Calcutta was rapidly overwhelmed by migrants escaping from the wrenching poverty of villages in the hope of earning some income in the city. These people huddled together in slums, on pavements, in holes in the wall under *pan* shops and conserved virtually every penny that they earned to remit to their village. As the years went by, the economic conditions of the agrarian hinterland went from bad to worse, and each successive decline unleashed yet another wave of migrants into the city.

Calcutta was at the receiving end of a classic development paradox. Clearly, migration would continue as long as the expected income in the city was greater than what could be earned in the villages. Only severe unemployment in the city could have stopped the flow of villagers into Calcutta. But all in all, the city was doing well enough to absorb these migrants in one activity or another with little waiting time. Simultaneously, the agrarian



hinterland was going from bad to worse; hence, migrants accepted lower reservation wages and longer queues. Thus, though real wages in the informal sector got depressed (even today, a domestic servant in Calcutta earns a paltry wage compared to his Delhi counterpart), it was still larger than the wages in the countryside, and migration continued unabated. This phenomenon was not unique to Calcutta. The only difference lay in the conditions of the hinterland. Simply stated, eastern India was in such a poor economic state that the city could offer very low wages and yet have a virtually inexhaustible supply of labour.

From an urban perspective, the obvious consequence was the proliferation of slums all over Calcutta – even in the hitherto pristine area of the south. Since the city's government had neither the money nor the mandate nor the political ability to raise additional real resources, it could do very little to check the growth of these *bustees* or improve their conditions. Moreover, constant undervaluation of urban property by all and sundry actually led to a steady fall in the real revenues of the Corporation – precisely at a time when the need for funds was at its greatest. The Corporation could no longer maintain slum-free havens for the city's rich. Small wonder then that Calcutta suddenly became a difficult city to live in.

After 1955

There is a common view that Calcutta's present problems can be traced back to the political turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

12.2 A pan shop in a cubby hole

According to its proponents, internecine war between political parties – fought in factories as well as on the streets – created an extremely unstable situation, leading to massive capital outflows from Calcutta, and escalated the problem of urban unemployment.

It is undoubtedly true that the period in question saw acute political and industrial turmoil. It is equally true that the events of the time scared off fresh private-sector investments in the future. Nevertheless, the belief that the turbulence of 1967-72 was the root cause of Calcutta's current state begs the issue. The fact of the matter is that ever since 1955, neither Calcutta nor West Bengal had enough investments to fully absorb the people released from depressed agriculture or driven out from East Pakistan.

After Independence, agrarian conditions rapidly worsened. The size of Calcutta's agricultural hinterland suddenly shrank to a third of its former extent. Moreover, the border districts – 24 Parganas, Nadia, Maldah West Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri – were no less inundated by refugees, which led to a rapid decline in the land-to-man ratio as well as per-capita availability of food. Matters worsened because the agricultural output of these relatively less fertile zones failed to match the growth of population. Thus the tendency to leave the villages for the city did not diminish after 1955; if anything, the reverse was true.

It needs to be appreciated that between 1955 and 1975, Calcutta did *not* witness a decline in real investments in the manufacturing sector in absolute terms. The problem was that the level of investment was inadequate to absorb the growing supply of labour. We often forget two fairly simple facts. First, even as late as 1970-71, manufacturing, construction, electricity, gas and water supply accounted for a mere 20.7 per cent of India's gross domestic product (while the primary sector, mainly agriculture, accounted for almost 50 per cent). In other words, the size of the secondary sector in India was, and continues to be, pitifully small. Second, the capacity of modern industry to absorb labour was smaller than the immediate need.

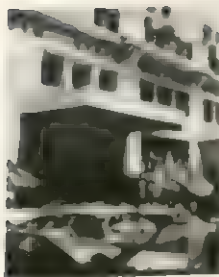
Theoretically, there is a case for adopting capital-intensive rather than labour-intensive technologies even in a surplus situation if the income that is more rapidly generated in modern factories can be skimmed off through

taxes and transfers for subsequent investment in the agricultural sector. However, this is where West Bengal, and indeed all other Indian states, faced the third problem. Ever since Sir Otto Niemeyer's 1963 report, an almost paranoid fear of the provinces led to the evolution of an all-powerful central government. The major instrument of this central power has been a centre-state fiscal relationship which ensures that the Union Government gets the principal share of central tax revenues with the states settling for a niggardly residue. In such a context, the principal game of any state is jockeying for public-sector investments with the powers-that-be in Delhi. In this game of vying for discretionary largesse, West Bengal has constantly come out as a loser.

Given his strong pre-Independence links with the idiosyncratic Bengal Congress and with Subhash Basu, Bidhan Ray – West Bengal's Chief Minister from 1948 to 1962 – started at a disadvantage in negotiations with the Union ministers in independent India. Formidable politicians from other states walked off with larger slices of the budget. Ray had his successes, the Durgapur Steel Plant and the Damodar Valley Corporation being his crowning acquisitions for West Bengal. These projects were certainly mammoth and dramatic, but they were hardly the stuff needed to absorb eastern India's surplus labour.

Ray's successors have been no more successful in garnering proportionately larger shares of the central exchequer. To be fair, this was often not for want of trying. Over time, there developed acutely antagonistic relationships between the Congress Party and the Opposition which made it difficult if not impossible for Opposition-ruled states (as West Bengal has been for all but five years since 1967) to get a secure share of central funds. By the early 1980s, the resource position in West Bengal was so acute as to jeopardize even the payment of Government salaries. (It has improved from this position since.) The serious upshot of this was a rapid decline in the level of real per capita public-sector investments. The psychological impact was an overwhelming sense of persecution and grievance against the Union Government.

There soon emerged two trends, both adversely affecting Calcutta. In the absence of the requisite doses of public-sector investment, the agrarian situation worsened. Besides, other



states such as Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu were now in a position to offer better facilities, and many firms registered in Calcutta directed fresh investments to these states rather than to West Bengal. From the 1950s, other industrial areas were growing much faster than Calcutta. Between 1951 and 1980 the average daily employment in the registered factories of West Bengal grew by 5 per cent; in Maharashtra and Gujarat it grew by 45 and 13 per cent respectively. The number of scrips quoted in the Calcutta Stock Exchange increased by less than 13 per cent between 1947 and the mid-1980s; in Bombay and Madras it grew by more than 100 per cent. Needless to say, this trend accelerated during the period 1967-72. Thus the old problems continued to haunt Calcutta, only on a larger scale. Steadily deteriorating agriculture kept pushing migrants into the city. At the same time, the city's industrial sector did not grow fast enough to employ this labour profitably and respectably.

Furthermore, very few cities in the world have been as averse to taxing its own wealth as Calcutta. For the last four decades, if not longer, not only has the municipal tax per capita been significantly smaller in Calcutta compared to Bombay but, more important, so has the incidence of tax or tax as a proportion of income. It has become virtually impossible to raise resources for any of the civic bodies of Calcutta without the fear of immediate and often destructive retaliation.

Thus, several trends appeared forcibly after 1955. The first was the continued deterioration of a shrunken agrarian hinterland. The second was the lack of adequate public sector investments to reverse the agrarian downswing. The third was the paucity of public funds for setting up manufacturing activities, coupled with the fact that the factory sector had a fairly low employment-generating potential. The fourth was the low level of private sector investment. The fifth was the growth of competing industrial locations outside the state, which took away future investments from Calcutta and West Bengal. To cap it all, the city failed to tax its own wealth more effectively.

These basic problems manifested themselves through a number of interlinked symptoms. The growth in urban population, especially among the middle-class refugee families,



1975 The refugee families

increased the demand for what could only be met by the state government, putting under ever greater strain a public sector that was already in a precarious financial state. Coupled with the problems of the state's economy, there was the increasing competition for land and labour, in those few industrial projects that were actually government-owned and under state financial control. Very soon, a fairly well developed private sector of factories and firms began to appear, some of which were still government-owned. Next, a significant concentration of the state-owned enterprises in the private sector of the city took place, and of the state-owned enterprises that were established in the city, many were transferred to the private sector.

The growth of a private sector from the communist Rajarat Nairam, Calcutta was poor because it was poor. And all things being equal, by the late 1980s, the industrial population of

the Calcutta Metropolitan District had shot up to nearly 10.1 million. There were some 260 refugees colonies with over 400,000 unrehabilitated refugees; over 200,000 people lived entirely on pavements and 2.5 million in *bustees*; and more than 4 million (or above 40 per cent of the population) lived below the poverty line.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by reiterating a few points and then making some additional observations. First, it needs to be clearly recognized that the roots of Calcutta's present malaise go back to the colonial period. A proper historical perspective demands that we eschew the view of old Calcutta as a 'City of Palaces'. Second, however saddening may be the decline of Calcutta, there is nothing exceptional or even surprising about it. Very few cities of comparable size have had hinterlands as poor and as rapidly declining as Calcutta's. The decay of great cities is linked to the decline of their hinterland: Venice fell with the shrinking of the Adriatic, Lisbon with the downfall of the *Estado da India*, Amsterdam with the demise of Dutch maritime power; and after World War II London became far less important than New York.


In real terms, all these famous cities had a richer hinterland than Calcutta at its peak. Calcutta may have been the 'glittering jewel' of the Raj; but the Raj ruled one of the poorer nations of the world. Calcutta's decay is not at all surprising given the acute poverty of eastern India. What is much more surprising are the gross inequalities of income that enabled it to 'glitter' amidst a sea of poverty. This same

inequality makes many young private-sector executives love Calcutta even today.


A much more germane issue is the future of the metropolis. It is important to realize that Calcutta's future hinges less upon short-term measures like the underground railway or the second Hugli bridge than upon certain basic long-term programmes. This is not intended to either minimize or belittle the need for the Metro or the second bridge. Nevertheless, at the risk of repetition, it should be emphasized that Calcutta's economic future critically depends on the state of its agrarian hinterland. The greater the agricultural decay, the greater will be the pressures on the city. Therefore what is needed is a massive and continued investment in agriculture and rural infrastructure. In this respect, it would seem that the present Government of West Bengal has adopted the correct (though insufficiently funded) strategy, however misplaced it may seem to the citizens of Calcutta. There is a curious policy paradox: the short-term neglect of Calcutta in favour of rural investment seems to be the only way of ensuring a future for the city in the long term.

More depressingly, however, it is highly unlikely that any State Government (and there are several states involved) will be able to garner sufficient funds to improve conditions in the hinterland to the point where migration tapers off. Till then the decline will continue. And with it should come the sobering perception that what has been happening in Calcutta since yesterday is today a reality in Bombay, and may happen to Bangalore tomorrow and one day even to impregnable Delhi.





THE ECONOMY OF CALCUTTA : TODAY AND TOMORROW



Bhabatosh Datta

It is not necessary in this article to give a detailed history of the economic growth of Calcutta and its surroundings. The 'surroundings' are important because industrial cities generally do not have their large industries within the city. A study of the economy of Calcutta has therefore to take for its geographical coverage the four-or-five-mile-wide belt on both sides of the Hugli river from Bandel in the north to Bajbaj in the south. The city provided (and still provides) the top management and the financial and commercial services for the region, while the industrial belt employs the workers and turns out the products. For an analysis of the present-day economy and assessment of the future prospects, the really relevant area is not the city alone – though this has also grown in area – but what is now known as the Calcutta Metropolitan District (CMD). From the present trends it seems to be almost certain that the 'outgrowth' area surrounding Calcutta will go on expanding.

Population Growth

A detailed account of Calcutta's population scenario will be found in the article on 'The Growth of Calcutta in the Twentieth Century' and 'The Demography of Calcutta'; but some reference to the subject must be made here as well. Calcutta city was defined in the early days as the area under the 'original jurisdiction' of the Calcutta High Court, bounded by the Hugli river on the west, the Bagbazar Canal on the

north and the Maratha Ditch (which later became the Circular Road) to the east and south. It was judicially an 'English City', in which the English laws relating to real property were applicable. In 1876, when the first proper census was taken, Calcutta had a population of 4,09,036, excluding the Fort and the Port. The number rose to nearly 5,43,000 at the turn of this century within the earlier limits of the city. There was a rapid increase in the present century, together with an expansion of the area. In 1931, the Calcutta Municipal area – which was much larger than the 'original jurisdiction' of the High Court – had a population of over 1.15 million. The partition of the country in 1947 created a two-way flow to and from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The outward flow was insignificant – the Urdu-speaking Muslims stayed on – while the inward flow of refugees from East Bengal was stupendously large. The population of the city jumped from 1.15 million in 1931 to 2.7 million in 1951, 2.93 million in 1961, 3.15 million in 1971 and 3.29 million in 1981. Adding the 'Special Charges' of the Fort and the Port, the 1981 figure stood at 3.3 million.

These figures do not show the full picture, because several millions of refugees settled in the outskirts of the city. In fact, the major part of the new population pressure fell on the municipal and rural areas surrounding Calcutta. This is evident from the differences between the post-Independence rates of population growth



in Calcutta and in what the Census authorities designate as the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration (CUA), which includes all municipal areas within the Calcutta region. The population of the municipal area of Calcutta grew by 8.48 per cent during 1951-61, 7.57 per cent during 1961-71 and 4.96 per cent between 1971 and 1981. While this rate of growth was declining, the population of the CUA increased by 28.14 per cent during 1951-61, 24.01 per cent during 1961-71 and by 23.90 per cent in the decade 1971-81. In 1981, the population of the Calcutta municipal area was 3.3 million, while that of the CUA was 9.194 million. Details of this growth are given elsewhere in the volume. The inclusion of three suburban municipalities in Calcutta in 1984 raised the population of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC) area to 4.143 million on the basis of the 1981 Census figures.

The CUA is now the tenth largest urban agglomeration in the world – a position it did not occupy even in 1975. According to UN estimates, in 1990 the CUA will still be in the tenth position with 11.9 million people, just below Greater Bombay with 12 million. By AD 2000 Greater Bombay and the CUA will have taken seventh and eight positions, with 17.1 million and 16.7 million people respectively.

In order to understand the character of the economic structure of Calcutta, it is also necessary to look at the sex-ratio. This has been treated in detail in the article on Calcutta's demography, but the findings need reiteration. The female-to-male ratio in Calcutta is substantially lower than the West Bengal average of 911 females to 1000 males, indicating the large number of 'single' migrants who come to the city for work, leaving their families behind in their village homes. But the proportion of females is somewhat higher in the CUA (781 to 1000 males) than in the core city or CMC area (712 to 1000 males), showing that a larger number of whole families have come to the outskirts than to the Corporation area. The refugees who have settled outside the city have naturally come with their families.

Finally, it is important to look at the position of Calcutta in the whole of West Bengal. The 1981 population of the city (3.3 million) was 22.9 per cent of the total urban population of the state and 6.1 per cent of the total population, urban and rural. The CUA as a whole had

in 1981 a population of 9.194 million which was 63.9 per cent of the total urban population of West Bengal and 16.9 per cent of the total rural and urban population. There has been noticeable growth of towns like Raniganj, Asansol, Bardhaman and Shiliguri, but West Bengal still has a large number of towns with a population of a few thousands only.

Calcutta's Domestic Product

The important economic question relates to the contribution of Calcutta to the gross domestic product of the state. It is extremely difficult to estimate this contribution. The state government does not publish district-wise domestic product data and, in any case, such data will be distorted by the large flows of income and expenditure between one district and another. For the core city, all that can be definitely stated is that there is practically no 'primary production' (agriculture etc.) within it. There is practically no large factory either, and the 'secondary production' in the city area is limited to the outputs of large numbers of small industrial units, located mostly in the suburbs or the fringes. The largest part of the core city's contribution to the gross domestic product of the state comes from the tertiary sector – i.e. from the imputed values of the outputs of banking and finance, trade, commerce and transport and other ancillaries to industry. And there is a large contribution – again estimated through imputed values – of the administrative services (Central, State and local Governments), education, health and a host of residual occupations. In many cases, one guess is as good or bad as another, and no one can be certain about the value of the gross product arising in Calcutta.

Unemployment

Some idea about the state of Calcutta's economy can be had from employment and unemployment data. Taking up unemployment first, one notes that Calcutta had the second largest number of recipients of unemployment assistance from the State Government up to 1986-87 with 89,114 assisted persons. The largest number of recipients was in 24-Parganas with 92,751, and the third largest in Bardhaman with 79,624. Of course, many of the recipients in the 24-Parganas district belong



to the CUA, along with those in Haora. The three-district total of 206,312 recipients was 40 per cent of the state total of 515,507. Of the total of 4.37 million in the live registers of West Bengal's employment exchanges in 1988, the majority were from the Calcutta agglomeration. There has however been a change in the district-wise distribution. Bardhaman, Bankura, Murshidabad, West Dinajpur and a few other districts like Purulia are getting larger shares of unemployment assistance.

Occupation-Structure

The picture is again incomplete when one comes to the occupation-structure. It should however be noted that a person showed as 'occupied' in the Census tables is not necessarily 'employed'. In 1981, the total number of 'main workers' in the CMC area was 1.153 million (1.068 million males and 0.085 million

females). It is interesting to note that 2,772 persons (2,176 males and 596 females) were recorded as 'cultivators' and another 2,455 (2,268 males and 187 females) as 'agricultural labourers'. Presumably these persons were producing, or helping to produce, small amounts of agricultural products (vegetables etc.) in the fringe areas, or were resident within the municipality while working in the adjoining rural areas. It is easy to explain 10,718 cultivators and 26,430 agricultural labourers in the whole CUA, because some of the municipalities have fringe areas used for agriculture or are quite near rural farmland. If one were to take the CMD (and not the CUA), the number of agricultural workers would be much larger because the CMD includes a number of villages adjoining the towns.

The number of persons engaged in 'household industry' (manufacturing, processing, servicing and repairing) in the core city in

13.1 The informal sector : vertical co-existence

1981 was 19,934 (18,097 males and 1,837 females). The corresponding number for the whole agglomeration was 72,935 (67,931 males and 5,004 females). Leaving out the 'marginal workers' numbering 10,747 in the core city and 106,945 in the agglomeration, there were 1,113,359 'other workers' in the core city (1,030,360 males and 82,999 females) and 2,629,565 (2,444,062 men and 185,503 women) in the agglomeration. These 'other workers' comprise all those engaged in large industry, commerce, trade and services. The 'non-workers' numbered 2,142,016 in the core city (854,412 men and 1,287,604 women) and 6,363,575 in the agglomeration (2,522,044 men and 3,841,531 women); they constituted 63.6 per cent of the total population of the core city and 68.5 per cent of that of the CUA. For well-known reasons, the number of non-workers among women was much larger than among men. These figures from the 1981 Census have not been updated. The West Bengal Government still publishes the data collected in the Economic Survey undertaken in 1980.

Production Units

It will also be noticed that these occupation figures lump together all persons engaged in large industry, commerce, trade, transport etc. and every type of service. They are not, therefore, very informative about the sectoral contributions to the local domestic product. Information about industry is particularly inadequate. The published official reports confirm the obvious fact that industrial units are located mostly outside the CMC area. In 1986, the number of registered working factories (excluding defence production units) in the core city was 782 – 47.3 per cent above the 1960 figure of 531. In contrast, the number of such factories increased in the 24-Parganas District by 125.7 per cent, from 1,632 in 1960 to 3,684 in 1986, and Haora District by 114.8 per cent, from 826 in 1960 to 1,774 in 1980. In the whole of West Bengal, the number nearly doubled between 1960 and 1986, from 4,093 to 8,064. It was natural that the high cost of land, strict building regulations and other constraints induced the investors to establish their units outside, but close to, the core city.

The information given above is more or less in line with the results of the Economic Census

of 1980 which revealed that Calcutta then had 97,971 'establishments engaging at least one hired worker', 'somewhat on a regular basis', and 89,748 'own-account enterprises', making a total of 1,87,719. The total number of workers in these enterprises was 11,71,581, of whom 9,15,852 were 'hired workers'. These totals are too broad to lead to any reliable conclusion, but the fact that there were in the city nearly 90,000 'own-account enterprises' is significant. This indicates that the small producer is very important in Calcutta – more important than the figures reveal, for it is doubtful whether they include the pavement stall-holders, hawkers and house-to-house pedlars. One of the most noticeable developments in Calcutta in recent decades has been the large growth in the numbers of pavement sellers and barrow-boys.

More definite information is available about the small-scale industrial units registered annually with the Directorate concerned. The number of such registrations in Calcutta was 1,340 in 1982-83 and 1,790 in 1987-88. The cumulative total came to 41,918 units, employing 358,201 workers. The total number was higher in the 24-Parganas – 46,626 employing 3,73,152 workers. Haora also had a large number – 32,185 with 2,38,341 workers. These figures have however to be carefully examined – first, because there have been changes in the definition of small-scale units in terms of the value of plant and machinery, and secondly, because the totals may include many sick, closed or even non-starter units. Even when allowance has been made for all this, Calcutta remains a large centre of small-unit production. The large-industry part of the 'industrial city' lies outside Calcutta but within the CUA. This wider area is the industrial zone of West Bengal. It is particularly interesting to note that Calcutta, Haora, Hugli and 24-Parganas account for nearly two-thirds of the total consumption of electricity in West Bengal (4,201 million KWH in 1984-85, out of the state's total of 6,793 million). The only other district with a large share is Bardhaman, which includes the Asansol-Durgapur industrial zone.

Historically, the major modern industry in the Calcutta region has been the jute mills. The first jute mill was established at Rishra in 1838. There was steady growth over the nineteenth century, and the pace became quicker after the railway lines connecting Calcutta with the

hinterland were constructed in the 1850s and 1860s. A big push was given to export trade in jute manufactures (and also in raw jute) after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. In the words of R.D. Wallace, the jute mills of the Calcutta area in the 1890s 'simply coined money'. Another period of prosperity was the four years of the First World War of 1914-18. Even in the 1920s the mills were expanding production and making large profits.

The world depression of 1930 came as a great shock from which the jute mills never fully recovered. There were short periods of prosperity – during the Second World War (1939-45) and the Korean War boom (1951-52) – but the effects were short-lived. The most serious factor affecting the jute mills of the Calcutta area after 1947 was the partition of Bengal which left the mills in Calcutta, while the raw jute-growing areas went to East Pakistan. Gradually, East Pakistan developed its own jute mills and export outlets.

Ignoring occasional spurts, the general trend in the jute industry since Independence has been one of stagnation, if not of positive decline. Apart from the competition of East Pakistan (later, Bangladesh), there has been a general down-trend in the world demand for jute bags for use in packing. Cheap and durable synthetics have appeared, and there has also been an improvement in the technology of bulk-handling which dispenses with packing materials altogether. The annual production of jute goods in India (which practically means the production in the Calcutta area) was 10,99,000 tonnes in 1961-62, rising to 13,84,000 tonnes in 1986-87. Between 1979-80 and 1986-87, the output was practically stagnant at around 13,50,000 tonnes.

Whatever increase in output has taken place in the last quarter of a century has been due mainly to the rise in domestic demand. Production of the export varieties (hessian and carpet-backing) have stagnated. In the case of internal consumption also, there are definite causes for concern. The total demand for jute manufactures has increased about twofold between 1970-71 and 1980-81, but this is largely explained by the increase in the production of agricultural and other bulk commodities which require jute as a packing material. In fact, there is a trend towards the use of synthetic bags for packing sugar, fertilizers etc., and there are sometimes frantic appeals to

the government for making the use of jute bags compulsory in certain specified cases.

Along with all this, there has been a decline in entrepreneurial interest in the jute mills. Attempts are rarely made to develop new products, and the new research laboratories have not been very effective. Machines and plants wear out. They are not maintained or replaced, and renovation is practically never attempted. It is interesting to note that a special fund for the renovation of jute mills created in 1987 remains largely unused. Profits earned from jute mills (when there are profits) are re-invested elsewhere, and some of the biggest factories are now on the sick list. Six major jute mills in the Calcutta area are now run at a heavy loss by the Government-owned National Jute Manufactures Corporation.

Another group that is in a decadent position comprises the small and medium-scale engineering units, mostly in the Haora district. These depend for their existence on orders from the Railways and from large factories which purchase their intermediate inputs from small units. The difficulties of the engineering units around Calcutta are due to increasing competition on the one hand and on the other, to the Central Government's policy of 'freight equalization' by which steel and coal are made available at common all-India prices everywhere. This takes away the special comparative cost advantages that West Bengal, and particularly the Calcutta area, could enjoy on account of nearness to the sources of supply. West Bengal now heads the list of states with sick units.

Some new industries are coming up – for example in the field of electronics, chemicals, plastic products etc. But the major schemes have been delayed. An acrylic fibre plant was approved some time ago, but the Haldia Petro-Chemical Project has been beset by delays. Similarly, there are difficulties about the Bakreshwar Thermal Power Project, which the previous government at the Centre refused to approve in the form in which the State Government wanted it. The State Government decided to 'go it alone', but a Rs. 800-crore project is beyond its normal resources. And there will be an escalation of cost with every delay in the completion of the project.

Power shortage is the single most important 'retardation factor' in the West Bengal economy. There is pronounced inefficiency in





the operation of the existing generating centres, but the absolute shortage is a fact that has to be emphasized. Some increase in capacity and generation is of course expected in the next two decades, but that will be adequate only for making the existing industrial units fully operative. A positive industrial growth will require large assured supplies of power without any breaks, but that goal does not seem likely to be reached. The industrial future of West Bengal, and of Calcutta in particular, rests on uncertainties of an ominous character.

Calcutta Port

The Calcutta port used to be the most important export outlet in India in the pre-Independence days, as practically all exports of tea and of jute and jute goods flowed out through this port. The relative importance of Calcutta in India's foreign trade has now fallen, because of the expansion of old ports like Bombay and development of new ports, and also because of the emergence of a wide variety of exportable goods which are produced outside the hinterland of the Calcutta port. The volume of cargo movement through Calcutta is however rising. In 1987-88, the total was 13.07 million tonnes, of which exports were 4.11 million tonnes, imports 8.68 million tonnes and inland cargo 0.28 million tonnes. It will be noticed that Calcutta has now become a major import inlet, accounting for the entry of a large variety of inputs for the new industries. More recent figures, when available, will certainly show further substantial increase – because of the overall increase in India's imports and also because of the inclusion of the trade through Haldia, which is officially part of Calcutta port. The share of Calcutta port (including the airport) is however only around 10 per cent of the total sea and air-borne trade of India. The Calcutta airport has become less important in the all-India picture than it was a decade ago. Both passenger and freight traffic have fallen in relative terms.

Banking

Another field in which the position of Calcutta has declined relative to the rest of the country is banking. Within West Bengal, Calcutta accounted for 883 bank offices in 1988, out of the state total of 3,583. There was one bank

office for every 4,000 residents. In the whole of West Bengal, there was one office for every 15,000 of population, while Maharashtra had an office for every 12,000. Deposits, advances and credit-deposit ratios have all been unimpressive in West Bengal when compared with states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab and Tamil Nadu. The position of Calcutta in the provision of banking services is indicated to some extent by the figures for cheque clearances. In 1970-71 the number of cheques cleared in Calcutta was 130 lakh, involving Rs 8,923 crore, while Bombay's figures were 366 lakh cheques covering Rs 13,342 crore. In 1986-87, cheque clearances in Calcutta had risen to 327 lakh involving Rs 43,255 crore, while in Bombay there were 469 lakh cheques covering Rs 98,330 crore. Between 1970-71 and 1986-87, banking business going through the clearing house in Calcutta increased 4.85 times, while the increase in Bombay was 7.37 fold. Partial figures for 1988 indicate sharp increases in both the centres.

Calcutta is of course dominant in the matter of deposits and advances within West Bengal. The latest available district-wise figures show that at the end of June 1985, the commercial banks in Calcutta had total deposits of Rs 5,607 crore, or 63.26 per cent of the state total of Rs 8,864 crore. In the case of advances, the amounts were Rs 3,642 crore and Rs 4,483 crore respectively. In other words, Calcutta alone accounted for 81.24 per cent. The credit-deposit ratio was 64.96 per cent in Calcutta and 50.57 per cent in West Bengal as a whole. By the end of September 1988, the credit-deposit ratio in West Bengal had declined to 49.9 per cent against the all-India average of 60.5 per cent.

The position comes into sharper focus when it is seen that if Calcutta is taken out, the credit-deposit ratio in the rest of West Bengal was only about 40 per cent. The high figures for Calcutta, relative to the state as a whole, are naturally due to the fact that most of the production units outside Calcutta have their head offices in the city and bank accounts are held and operated by these offices.

The all-India term-financing institutions have generally denied West Bengal and Calcutta an adequate share in the loans sanctioned. The West Bengal State Financial Corporation has also been less active than similar bodies in Maharashtra or Gujarat. It is

not a compliment to Calcutta that the only official term-financing institution with its headquarters here is the Industrial Reconstruction Bank of India, charged with the task of helping sick industries.

Strikes and Lock-outs

The economy of Calcutta has grown slowly in recent years. One could even describe the position as one of stagnation. Calcutta and West Bengal lead India in the number of sick industrial units. The rate of growth, even when positive, has been much below the rates in the other major cities. The factors responsible for this are many. A relative decline was only to be expected when new industrial centres were emerging all over the country. The geographical spread of industrial growth all over the country is part of the planning policy of the Government of India, but there has also been a fall in the attractiveness of Calcutta as an industrial area.

However, not all the reasons given are factually admissible. Complaints are often made about labour unrest, but the extent of such unrest is not more marked in this zone than in other comparable areas. Besides, the major part of the man-days lost is due to



*Above :
13.2 A factory under
lock-out*

*Below :
13.3
A pavement stall-
owner*

closure and lock-outs rather than strikes. In 1987, of the 24.01 million man-days lost in West Bengal (which would mostly relate to the Greater Calcutta area), 22.37 million days were lost on account of lock-outs. Some of the lock-outs reflect the employers' response to labour union demands, and some are simply closures due to sickness. Even then the high figures are significant.

Retail Trade

At first sight, it is surprising that while the economy of Calcutta is sliding backwards in many respects, there are two lines in which there has been remarkable expansion – retail



trade and real estate. The whole of Calcutta abounds in retail sale outlets. Large shopping centres and air-conditioned markets have grown up for the very rich. Markets with questionable sources of supply have emerged, particularly in the port area. Much more important is the large increase in the number of small shops and pavement stalls. The substantial growth of retail trade does not easily connect itself with the low growth of output, even when one takes into account the fact that the articles sold are not necessarily produced in West Bengal. Not all the sellers can in these conditions earn enough for their livelihood, but they engage in retail trade because there is no other opening for their employment. Even when they make profits, that is largely because of the absence of any overhead costs – site rent, stall rent, licence fees etc. All that they have to do is to keep the policemen and the local toughs happy.

Real Estate

The growth of investment in real estate is also very surprising. If the economy of Calcutta is going down, relative to other cities at least, what is the attraction in erecting high-rise apartment houses, buying apartments in them at extremely high prices, or renting them at sky-high rates? Calcutta was believed to have a soil unsuitable for tall buildings, but there have been changes in building standards and also in construction technology. It is reported that between 1983 and 1987 the Calcutta

Corporation issued more than 500 licences for the construction of highrise buildings. While the general lament is that there is a flight of capital from Calcutta, that profits earned here are diverted for investment elsewhere, there is a growing inflow of capital in the real estate market. An important fact to note is that the prices paid are often much higher than would be justified by the prevailing capitalization rates (based on the effective long-term rates of interest). In such cases, the only conceivable explanation is that the investors in real estate are speculators looking for capital gains. In the absence of a parallel growth of the economy as a whole, a real estate crash may not be far away.

Calcutta's physical growth has been vertical, through high-rise buildings, as well as horizontal through new construction in the eastern and southern periphery. (The north is rigidly bounded by the existing constrictions, and the west by the river.) The rich are occupying the prime residential areas within the city, the upper middle class is moving east or south, and the lower middle class is being driven to locations outside the city. The lowest income groups, however, continue to live within the city, in slums of the utmost squalor: slum-dwellers constitute more than one-third the total population of the city. The city of the rich and the city of the poor can be easily identified.

A very undesirable effect of the large-scale construction activity within the city area, and more particularly in the eastern suburbs, is that normal free flow of surplus rainwater from the north and west is being obstructed. The terrain of the city slopes from the north to the south and from the west to the east. Large-scale building construction, authorized and unauthorized, has made waterlogging an annual problem in Calcutta during the monsoons. The Eastern Metropolitan Bypass has provided for quick movement between the north and the south, but it has also been thought to act as a man-made dam across the flow-path of rainwater.

Municipal Services

The other visible result of construction activity is the pressure on municipal services – sewerage, garbage-clearance, water-supply, road maintenance and public health facilities. The Corporation of Calcutta was first

13.4 The high-rise boom



established by a Royal Charter issued by George I in 1726. Its constitution has passed through a number of changes, and it is governed at present by the Calcutta Municipal Corporation Act of 1980. In 1986-87 the total revenue income of the Corporation (now renamed the Calcutta Municipal Corporation) from its 'own sources' was Rs 61.01 crore, of which Rs 34.10 crore came from the property tax, Rs 16.5 crore from other taxes and Rs 10.5 crore from non-tax sources. The revenue expenditure in that year was Rs 89.20 crore, of which Rs 65.30 crore was accounted for by salaries and wages. The revenue deficit of Rs 18 crore had to be financed by grants from the State Government.

In these conditions, it is natural that municipal services should be inadequate. There are no funds left for development, except those which are specified as plan grants by the State Government. The Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) had done commendable work in road-building and other improvements in the inter-war period, but its importance has now declined with the rise of the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA). The CMDA, with liberal assistance from the World Bank, has undertaken major projects of drainage and water supply. A difficult problem arises when the projects are completed and handed over to the Corporation, because adequate funds are not available for maintenance and operation. As a result, full benefits are often not derived even from the best of projects.

Power

One of the most crucial problems of Calcutta is that of power supply. The Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation (CESC) is responsible for supplying electricity to the city and some neighbouring areas. Although not generally allowed to expand its investments, it has been permitted to develop new power stations as a special measure. As a general principle, all new production in the state was entrusted for long to the West Bengal State Electricity Board (WBSEB), but recently a new body called the West Bengal Power Development Corporation has been given charge of the Kolaghat thermal plant. Supplies are also available from the Damodar Valley Corporation, the National Thermal Power Corporation's plant at Farakka,

and the State Government's Durgapur Projects. Details have been given in the article on 'Power Supply'.

The total present generating capacity stands at nearly 2000 megawatts, but it is distressingly under-utilized. The CESC and some of the new units maintain a load factor of around 60 per cent, but there are other units like Santaldih where utilization is extremely poor. The overall utilization ratio in West Bengal is around 42 per cent, while the all-India ratio is above 50 per cent. If West Bengal could achieve 50 per cent utilization, it could meet the present level of controlled demand.

The result of the present under-utilization is a serious shortage of power, forcing the government to impose restrictions on the use of power by industries. Some of the major factories have installed captive generators, but the cost of operation is very heavy. Domestic customers have to face power cuts frequently, and industry has to accommodate itself to the shortage. The most important handicap to the future economic growth of the Calcutta area may be a continuing shortage of power, despite the installation of new plants and plans for new development.

The Future

An overall view of the economy of Calcutta as the city approaches its tercentenary is not promising. Calcutta is overcrowded, with inadequate housing, transport and municipal facilities. The industrial situation is distressing, and it is openly stated by potential investors that as long as the shortage of power and other problems continue, new industry will not be attracted. In the recent past, the State Government has pointed continually to the Centre's apathy towards (or even discrimination against) West Bengal, as testified by delays in sanctioning projects like Haldia Petrochemicals or the Bakreshwar Thermal Power Project, as also by inadequate assistance from the official financial institutions. A specific grievance is the 'freight equalization' policy described earlier. Meanwhile income disparities are presumably increasing. There is no direct statistical evidence, but the growth of luxury construction on the one hand and the expansion of slums on the other tell their own story. Calcutta's future has to be built upon a severely problem-racked base.





One can start by looking at the plans that have been made by the authorities. In 1980, the CMDA prepared a draft plan for the whole area under its charge for the year 2001. In 1986 the Mayor of Calcutta submitted to the Government of India a capital investment plan for the municipal area under the title 'The City of Joy'. More recently, the CMDA has started working on a Basic Development Plan for the twenty years from 1986 to 2006, to extend the original Basic Development Plan made by the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization (CMPO) for 1966-86. The CMDA draft plan for 2001 AD was very thorough in providing for schools, hospitals, wide roads, drainage, sewerage and water supply. It presented plans for developing new small and medium-sized industries in Calcutta and the adjoining areas. Projections were made and plans formulated for meeting the power requirements of the next two decades.

The objective of the CMDA Draft Plan was to ensure 'full employment' in the area. It is here that the Plan exposed its two basic inadequacies. First, attempts at full local employment fail simply because the plan-area attracts unemployed persons from outside the area. Secondly, the investment required may be inordinately high. In the case of the CMDA Draft Plan, the estimated investment for ensuring 'full employment' in the area would involve denuding the rest of West Bengal of all development resources whatsoever. This is to put the problem upside down: Calcutta cannot develop in isolation from the rest of West Bengal.

The Mayor's 'City of Joy' plan of 1986 was hurriedly drawn up, when the then Prime Minister expressed a desire to look into the problems of West Bengal. The development schemes incorporated in the plan included water supply, sewerage and drainage; solid waste management and nightsoil removal; improvement of slums, refugee colonies and adjoining areas, roads, parks, gardens and the environment; health and sanitation; preservation of historical buildings and monuments; and erection of harijan labour quarters. Strangely, the long list did not include primary education, though large numbers of slum children do not have schools within short walking distance. Power supply was left out presumably because it was the responsibility of

the State Government and not the Municipal Corporation.

The time-horizon of the plan was not clearly indicated, but it was a two-part plan, the first part relating to 'the next few years'. However, the total investment required was computed to be Rs 1,827 crore. In other words, if the plan were to range over a period of ten years, the annual requirement would be Rs 183 crore, or more than three times the annual revenue receipts of the Corporation. Of course, the plan was drafted in the expectation of Central grants for Calcutta on the grounds that it is a 'national city'; but anyone with a knowledge of the realities knows that such sums as Rs 183 crore per year will not be made available for capital expenditure on Calcutta, in addition to the requirements of the Calcutta Metro and the second Hugli bridge.

The new Basic Development Plan of the CMDA for 1986-2006 is in the process of preparation. In the meantime the CMDA, as the 'Planning Authority' of the area under the West Bengal Town and Country (Planning and Development) Act of 1979, has been preparing plans for all the constituent towns. The Act requires the CMDA to prepare first an Outline Development Plan for each area, and then, after considering objections etc., a Detailed Development Plan. The main objective of the Outline Plan is to lay down norms of land use and particularly to indicate the zones to be reserved for residential, industrial, commercial and recreational purposes. This plan will also lay down the 'floor-area ratio' for buildings and the norms for the provision of roads and transport facilities.

The CMDA has already prepared outline plans for a number of wards in the Calcutta municipal area and for some adjoining municipalities. The work has been delayed much beyond the statutory time limit, but it is encouraging to see that something positive is being done. Unfortunately, the State Government is not always adhering to the prescriptions of the outline plans, even when these have been accepted in principle. There has, for instance, been more than one controversy over Government plans for building markets on the sites of parks: one of the most commendable proposals of the CMDA was to prohibit all encroachment on parks and open areas, whose numbers and extent in Calcutta are grossly inadequate.

As things stand now, there is not much of systematic planning for the economy of Calcutta and the surrounding areas. The State Planning Board has not yet prepared the much-needed 'perspective plan' for industrial recovery and growth in the area over the next two or three decades. Piecemeal decisions are taken in some cases, as with the establishment of an electronics industry complex in the Bidhan Nagar (Salt Lake) area. While the need for developing an electronics industry in the state is easily understood, a question may arise as to whether, all things considered, Calcutta city provides the best location for such a complex. The future of the jute mill industry is bleak, and the possibility of developing power supply adequate for a new spate of industrial growth is uncertain. Hence Calcutta's future seems to lie in developing a wide variety of modern small industries, with low power consumption or with their own generators.

Alternative Scenarios

One can draw up two alternative scenarios for the future of Calcutta and its economy. The first is a projection from recent trends, while the second assumes a carefully determined planning strategy. According to the first scenario, the city will grow more and more congested; the peripheral areas will soon become overcrowded too. The central business district and the southern residential areas will become a dense forest of high-rise buildings. Transport facilities will not be able to cope with the increasing number of commuters and intra-city passengers. Municipal services will reach breaking point. And the most unfortunate result will be that after a time, the economic growth of Calcutta will cease owing to this extreme inadequacy of transport and municipal services. The present real estate boom is, as has been argued earlier, a purely speculative boom, buyers paying unaccountably high prices in the hope of selling at still higher prices. But this cannot go on indefinitely without a 'real base' of increased production. Any continuation of the present trends, however injected with piecemeal improvements here and there, cannot raise much hope for the future of Calcutta.

The alternative scenario must be projected on the clear understanding that the best way to save Calcutta and put it on a path of meaningful growth is to lighten the burdens on the city. All

efforts in recent times – the Metro and the Circular Railway for example – have been aimed at increasing the inflow of people into the city, while the right course would have been to encourage an outflow. This can be achieved by developing industrial centres and good residential locations – complete with all educational, medical and other facilities – away not only from the core city but from the present metropolitan area. These centres must *not* be within commutable distance of Calcutta.

The idea here is to develop alternative magnets for men and capital in the western and northern districts of the state. One of the major requirements will be the creation of steady sources of power supply for the whole state, from not only Bakreshwar but other new units as well. A development plan for Calcutta has to be the component of an integrated development plan for the whole state. The usual state plans aim at achieving certain target rates of output growth; they then estimate the capital requirements, following all this up by financial calculations. The 'spatial' aspect of planning does not get adequate attention. Yet this is probably more basic than anything else.

Calcutta can again become a vibrant economic area if the planners clearly recognize that the future of the city lies in developing the rest of West Bengal. To ensure a promising

13.5 Circular Railway Station at B.B.D. Bag



future for Calcutta, there has to be a West Bengal plan which takes into full account the requirements of all areas, rural and urban, and links them together into an internally consistent, feasible programme of action with a clearly defined time-horizon.

Postscript, 1990

Some very recent developments encourage hope for the growth of new industries. As stated earlier, an 'electronics complex' has emerged in the Salt Lake (Bidhan Nagar) area with government sponsorship and collaboration. The general rule prohibiting new large factories near metropolitan cities has been



13.6 *A modern electronics complex at Bidhan Nagar*

relaxed on the assumption that the electronics units will not create pollution or other environmental hazards.

An important development relates to the Haldia Petro-chemical complex. The plans and projects for this complex had encountered many obstacles, but things changed suddenly towards the end of 1989. The then Prime Minister laid the foundation stone of the complex in October 1989. And when there was a change of government at the Centre in November, the leading industrialists of India

began to feel that the time was ripe for large investments in West Bengal.

It is not necessary here to go into the full story. The important fact is that schemes are nearly ready for a naptha cracker plant at Haldia and for eight 'downstream' projects which will process the outputs of the plant. It seems likely now that, unless there is again a drastic political change, the whole Haldia complex will be ready for production of essential industrial inputs before the end of the century.

The complex (including the downstream projects) will be located near Calcutta, and the city will certainly benefit from the successful implementation of this scheme. In fact, any industrial development anywhere in West Bengal will create new demand in Calcutta for banking and other services, and will also expand Calcutta's trade. Besides, the creation of a source of demand for labour outside Calcutta is likely to reduce the pressure of migration of the unemployed into the city. The mother plant will be highly capital-intensive and the employment-effect will be small, but the downstream projects, particularly those which can be described as third and fourth-generation projects – the grandchildren of the mother unit, so to speak – can be designed in such a way as to spread employment over a wide area, raise the state domestic income substantially, increase the demand for the services that Calcutta can offer, and at the same time lessen the intensity of the problems of municipal management of the city. The year 1990 seems to have opened on a note of hope.

If the new situation proves long-lasting, it may become easier to implement the plans for additional power generation. In fact, the development of Haldia and other industrial projects will call for a large and steady supply of power. It may now be hoped that there will be a significant improvement in this field. Assuming that the momentum generated in early 1990 will not only continue but be accelerated, the turn of the century may bring about a turn in the city's hitherto sluggish economy.



THE MARWARIS OF CALCUTTA



Sukumar Mitra and Amita Prasad

When Calcutta grew in the eighteenth century into the second city of the British empire, among the unheroic heroes of the drama was Mahatabchand Jagatseth, head of a Marwari family of bankers that had left its native Rajasthan in the late seventeenth century and established itself at Murshidabad via Patna. The Jagatseths have been called the Indian Rothschilds of their age. Bankers to the Nawab's government, their estate was 'esteemed as the King's treasury'. In 1753 they were sole purchasers of all the bullion imported into Bengal.

But not content with money power alone, the Jagatseths aspired to have a finger in Bengal's political pie. One Jagatseth, Fatehchand, engineered a political revolution in 1740; Mahatabchand brought about another in 1757.

Further, the European traders in Bengal found it impossible to operate without the aid of the Jagatsaths. The English, strongest among the Europeans, shrewdly befriended the clan and even paid it what must have been an irksome subservience. Mahatabchand failed to see that such paramountcy actually made him vulnerable, for it militated against English interests in Bengal. Jagatseth held the Nawab's treasury; the English also, in 1765, bargained with the Mughal Emperor not for the throne but for the treasury of Bengal. The Jagatseths' alliance with the English was a veritable leap out of the frying pan into the fire. In 1763, Nawab Mir Kasim had Mahatabchand and his

brother murdered. In 1765, the English demanded Rs 1,25,000 from his successor, with a down payment of Rs 50,000, as the price for being allowed to continue in business. There was no escape from the 'new *bargis*', more rapacious than the Maratha raiders so named.

After this prelude, the Marwari inhabitants of Calcutta numbered only a handful in the late eighteenth century. Bengali Hindus dominated the city's 'native' economy till the mid-nineteenth century. The influx of Marwaris began as the city grew in importance in the early nineteenth century. The expense, strain and hazards of the long journey to Calcutta did not deter them; but it was the coming of the railways in the early 1860s that opened the floodgates. They nested in Barabazar in ever larger numbers. Socially too, they found Calcutta a freer place: caste prejudice did not hinder money-making. Within a short time they were entrenched in Calcutta's bazaars as bankers and merchants. By 1827, there was 'something like a Marwari Chamber of Bankers' operating in Barabazar.

Some of today's best-known Marwari families – the Singhanias, the Sarafs, the Kotharis and the Bagris – were well-established in business by the 1830s. Others made their mark by the turn of the century: the Poddars, the Mundhras, the Dalmias, the Dugars, the Jalans, the Jhunjhunwalas, the Jaipurias, the Rampurias and the Birlas.

The Bengali financiers and capitalists of

Calcutta were nearly all dead or destroyed by the 1850s. Their descendants, by and large, became dignified parasites squandering their forefathers' wealth and relying on English magistrates for the security of their property. The new Bengali *bhadralok* were equally reliant on employment or patronage from the British: they remained suspended between dependence and defiance. The stage was left free for the Marwaris to build their fortunes and take Calcutta's economy into their hands. This they proceeded to do with remarkable patience, industry, frugality, skill and astuteness. They had reasons to be satisfied with the opportunity that English rule and English trade offered them to get rich.

From the mid-nineteenth century, Barabazar began to grow as a stronghold of Marwari businessmen. By the 1870s they came to control the crucial inland trade in jute and cotton piece-goods. By the end of the century, they had virtually monopolized the indigenous banking system as well. Their growing power and importance in the city was indicated by the

foundation of the Marwari Association in 1898 for promotion of the 'social, moral and intellectual as well as commercial well-being' of the community, and the Marwari Chamber of Commerce in 1901. About 1892, when Harrison (now Mahatma Gandhi) Road was constructed, the land flanking the road was sold in small plots. The Marwaris bought up most of them. The mansions they built, inspired by memories of Rajasthani architecture, still give Barabazar its characteristic aspect.

Through the nineteenth century the Marwari gathered at Calcutta, it seems, to muster enough strength to avenge in the twentieth century the wrong done to them in the eighteenth. There began a stirring epoch, involving Calcutta's Bengalis and Marwaris alike, though as economic rivals the two were now grossly unequal.

Thanks mainly to enlightenment from the West, Calcutta became the epicentre of a national awakening that, starting as an intellectual movement among Bengali Hindus, led towards the close of the nineteenth century to

14.1 A Marwari family at home



the bitter revelation, first, that the premisses of English liberalism and *la mission civilisatrice* concealed sinister colonial designs; and secondly, that the English were determined to cripple their rising Indian economic rivals. The awakened Bengalis, at the start of the twentieth century, grew impatient to storm the English political citadel. A couple of decades later, the awakened Marwaris of Calcutta took the lead in striking, in an altogether different manner, at the true base of British power in India – the economic.

Even at the turn of the century, the Marwaris had accepted the obstructionism and racial discrimination of the British and operated as subservient collaborators of the latter's import-export interests. They had little sympathy with the nationalist movement in Bengal or its 'buy Swadeshi' campaign. The First World War proved to be a windfall for the Marwaris: they traded, speculated and undertook contracts. Faced with the mounting nationalist movement, the government also made concessions to retain their support. Already enjoying a wide market in the country in imported cotton goods, they now broke into the international jute market, while wresting control of the Calcutta Stock Exchange. In the process, they accumulated enough capital to enter the world of industry after the War as rivals of the British houses.

During the War, the Calcutta-based Birla Brothers became leading raw jute exporters to London. In 1918-19 Swarupchand Hukumchand and G.D. Birla founded jute mills in Calcutta. A cotton mill was brought from Andrew Yule by Keshoram Poddar (1883-1945) in 1918.

After the War, in fact, Calcutta became the country's chief battleground of British and Indian business interests. The former combined to form the Associated Chambers of Commerce in 1921 to meet the growing Indian challenge. The Indians replied by forming the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries, originally organized in 1926 in Calcutta at the initiative of G. D. Birla and his Marwari associates. In the same year was founded, also at Calcutta, the Indian Chamber of Commerce with G.D. Birla as its first President. Thus there began in Calcutta, under G.D. Birla's leadership, the great offensive against British economic power in India.

If Calcutta had been the grave of the Jagat-

seths' fortunes, it became two centuries later the cradle of the Birlas'. A man of genius, Ghanshyamdas Birla (1894-1983) symbolized the aggressive Indian nationalist spirit of the time. He was the only Indian to earn – virtually by threats – membership of the London Jute Association. Fatehchand Jagatseth had once assured the English – then at his mercy – that 'he would not be their enemy'. In 1928 G.D. Birla declared: 'I should not like to fight them [the English] unnecessarily, but if I have to I must.'

In meeting this new antagonist, the British were hampered by the rule of law and respect for capital that tempered their despotism. They could easily hang a Kshudiram Basu, but could not lightly touch a Ghanshyamdas Birla.

From now onward, we discern more and more clearly a change in the attitude of the Marwari community towards Calcutta. The imperial edifice, however outwardly august, had begun to weaken. The capital was shifted to Delhi – perhaps because Calcutta had ceased to be a city of peace. This was the beginning of Calcutta's continuing tradition of haughty non-conformism. At this juncture, Mahatma Gandhi emerged on the political scene. G.D. Birla, with rare foresight, combined the politics of non-violence, the philosophy of the Gita, patronage of khadi and promotion of industry, to merge a distinctively Marwari economic nationalism with the mainstream of the nationalist movement. Gandhi was accustomed to turn to Birla, and Birla placed himself at Bapu's disposal.

The Bapu-Birla nexus made Indian big business the chief beneficiary of India's independence. The only countering factor was the socialism of Jawaharlal Nehru; but this was basically of the English-democrat variety, and Birla, who so largely controlled the nation's money-power, did not find it a major hurdle.

Calcutta and Bengal, meanwhile, continued to be politically 'delinquent'. In the sixties the state even showed signs of going truly socialist. Today the Marwaris, who fought their way to fame and fortune in Calcutta, have largely turned to greener pastures in other states and cities. They could not stop incorrigible Calcutta from getting poorer; Calcutta, in turn, could not stop them from getting richer.

Needless to say, Marwari interests are still paramount in the city's economy. Nor has the community lacked the good sense and



14.2 G. D. Birla



14.3 The Birla Planetarium

generosity to benefit Calcutta in a number of ways. They have endowed the city with temples, *dharamshalas*, schools, colleges, hospitals, auditoriums and various charitable institutions. They have set up an excellent network of drinking-water posts on the city streets. The Marwari Relief Society, noted for its good work, was founded in 1920. And the Birlas in particular have added to Calcutta's cultural and scientific resources with a Planetarium, an Industrial and Technological Museum, a Fine Arts Gallery, a Sabhaghar or meeting-hall, an Institute of Liberal Arts and Management Sciences, and, most recently, a Heart Research Centre – all institutions the city can be proud of. In recent times, educated Marwari women have also played a part in the city's intellectual, cultural and philanthropic activities.

As all this indicates, the community has been changing its ethos, swiftly and consciously, since the Second World War and Independence.

They are seeking a new image and a larger place in the sun. Today's Marwaris may be broadly divided into three categories. Not all are rich – in fact, the majority are not. Most of them – of varied mentality and very unequal means – still live in Barabazar in much the traditional way. Then there is a fair-sized intermediate group, affluent and well-educated, with abundant worldly ambition but new social and cultural aspirations as well; and finally, a small, exclusive, immensely wealthy and powerful body controlling large interests in trade, industry and finance, and widely involved in national and international politics and culture. These two latter groups have moved out of Barabazar into other localities: Baliganj, Salt Lake, and at the top of the ladder, Alipur. In place of their old austerity, they now proclaim their success through highly competitive conspicuous living.

Barabazar and Alipur are the two poles of Calcutta's Marwari society today. The transformation from a Barabazar trader to an Indian industrialist with an eye on the world market was not merely an economic change; it brought about a cultural revolution as well. Yet Marwaris of all descriptions are still held together by certain deep values and traditions. They have a pronounced in-group loyalty, marked above all in their social communication, food habits and marriage customs. Hence their laudable philanthropic and cultural role has not been matched by any enthusiasm for social reform.

Such conservatism goes hand in hand with religious devotion, even while it is related to the habitual pursuit of wealth. A well-niched idol and two *mantras* in red letters – one sacred, the other profane – are still invariably set at the entrance to their homes. They not only testify to the community's innate pragmatism, but also lend meaning and colour to the inner complexity of their worldly existence.



BARABAZAR



Bunny Gupta and Jaya Chaliha

The 'Great Bazaar' or strictly 'Buro Bazaar' (from 'Buro', the fond appellation of Lord Shiva) existed before the British arrived 300 years ago. Sutanuti Hat, the thread and yarn market, gave its name to the riparian village on the Bhagirathi river (later named the Hugli) and spread over a quarter of its 1,692 bighas. By 1707, 80 per cent of the market area was crowded with houses and shops, though these were only of mud and thatch: it was always the most populous part of the young city. No wonder its new-comer English neighbours to the south named it the 'Bara' or Great Bazaar. The rest of Sutanuti consisted chiefly of jungle, swamp, and rice-fields. On a few bighas were planted cotton, tobacco and bananas.

The Sheths, Basaks, Sheels and Dattas, pioneers of trade and the banians of Bengal, moved in from Hugli town and settled in Gobindapur when the port of Saptagram or Satgaon on the western bank, the commercial centre of old Bengal, went into decline. They conducted their business in Sutanuti Hat, which had grown in importance as the Portuguese power declined: shipping was diverted there from Betore on the opposite bank. Thursdays and Sundays were market days. Sellers of iron and silver, rice and lentils, fish and meat, bananas, sugar-cane and vegetables, all assembled at what was basically the cotton market. Stevedoring began to flourish, as sailing ships

from the West called for re-victualling and other necessities. There was good reason why Job Charnock chose the neighbourhood of Sutanuti for an important factory on the eastern bank of the river.

In 1727, a Mayor and aldermen constituted a court, on today's Old Court House Street, to administer British law to British subjects. Civil, fiscal and judicial powers over 'natives' were vested in the White Zamindar, the official who formally held Zamindari rights over Calcutta on the Company's behalf. A part of the municipal revenue was collected, on the Mughal pattern, from the eighteen bazaars, big and small. The markets were auctioned to the highest bidder. The ground rent he paid the Company was Rs 3 per bigha in 1745. In return, he could levy a 9 per cent tax on all consumer items. Craftsmen making fireworks, vermilion, chests etc. paid more, to protect their monopolies.

The loot from the Battle of Palashi (1757) funded the new Fort William in Gobindapur. The displaced Sheths and Basaks were compensated with more land in Sutanuti, and the bi-weekly *hat* grew into a *bara bazaar*, a permanent residential wholesale market.

Like some lodestone, Barabazar attracted traders from near and far. The Armenians, the Jews and the Chinese even brought their countrywomen with them and settled on the edge of the great Asian bazaar. The Greeks



Above :
15.1 Barabazar at the
turn of the century

Below :
15.2 A Barabazar
'gaddi'



came too, and the Portuguese were already well ensconced. Colesworthy Grant in 1850 described a 'diversified group' of 'oriental heads', hailing from Turkey to the China Sea, bearing spices, incense and drugs; silks and brocades; furs, fruits and gems; shawls and calicoes, Murshidabad and Benares silks; muslins from Dhaka and broadcloth from England.

Most crucial, however, was the arrival of the frugal Rajasthani or 'Marwari' with his proverbial 'brass pot and blanket': the brass soon turned to gold at the Midas touch of Barabazar. The influx increased with the rail link in the 1860s, and the newcomers outnumbered the already domiciled Khattris. They remained, and changed the face of Barabazar.

The fortunes of the original settlers declined with the change in the Company's policy for the procurement of goods. Rajasthanis replaced the Bengali merchants or *baniyas* in economic power: the latter henceforth confined themselves to the roles of landlord, civil servant, lawyer, doctor, poet and politician. Some remained owners of prime property in the area, but these assets were eroded by fragmentation and litigation. The Marwaris, meanwhile, evolved a distinctive economic system, only tenuously linked to orthodox models of political economy. Floating, small-time operators joined hands with the large monopolists to take over the distribution of many commodities, above all of basic consumer goods. In this century, the wealthiest Marwaris inevitably turned to industry. With this change of outlook there gradually came a change of life-style: they moved to more spacious quarters in Alipur and Baliganj, once the suburbs of the city.

Though most Marwaris still live in Barabazar, the area basically continues to be a conglomerate of private markets, huddled within the compass of a single square mile. The weekday population is nearly 8 lakh, including business travellers and commuters. Lives are still based on rural traditions, with the element of transience common to all bazaars. Yet despite its squalor, there is no real poverty in Barabazar. Violent crime is at its lowest in this part of the city. The evident underworld is confined to pickpockets and petty thieves who find easy victims in the crowds and quick escape among the maze of lanes. But ticking away among the lanes is a 'parallel economy' that defies quantification and indeed description. This is vividly symbolized by a thirteen-

storey market building: unauthorized and much litigated, it is without water and electricity, but a huge and flourishing trade carries on by lamplight.

The centuries have scarcely changed the variety of merchandise in the gigantic marts of Barabazar. Porters with baskets dodge the overloaded Tata trucks along the same cobbled roads where bullock carts once carried bales of cotton. Labyrinthine lanes lead off into *pattis* or wholesale marts. Pagayapatti offers blankets by the score, cloth by the *than* (roll) and cut pieces by the kilogram. Khangrapatti's *khangras* or broomsticks have themselves been swept into a corner by canvas and tarpaulin. Cloth and readymade garments have similarly usurped Sutapatti, yarn market and direct descendant of Sutanuti Hat. A commerce graduate from St. Xavier's College sits here at his ancestral *gaddi*, his telephone perched on hanks of yarn. He estimates his annual turnover at about Rs 100 crore. It is said that 60 per cent of the total wealth of Calcutta's Marwaris is here in Barabazar.

In Darmahata (now Maharshi Debendranath Road, the impermanent *darma* (reed matting) has been replaced by bricks and bags of cement. The hardware shops of old now stock sophisticated building materials. That the river flowed by the western edge of the market is remembered in Mirbahar Street, where the Harbour Master or *mirbahar* was stationed in Mughal times.

We pass through more alleyways to the *postas* (warehouses) of Gopal Mallik and Gobardhan Das, the wholesale potato and onion markets. Dust from the gunny bags mingles with spices: coughs and sneezes punctuate the way to the Raja of Bardhaman's chowk, Raja Katra. Here a sea of green betel leaves, betel-nuts both whole and chopped, little bricks of brown *katha* (catechu) and all the flavourings for a good *khilli* of *pan* are skilfully sorted into heaps of muted colours and musky smells. Stepping out again, the eye blinks at the sudden light, through which the span of Haora Bridge gleams like a permanent silver bow.

Sonapatti, the gold-traders' mart, paves Manohar Das Street metaphorically with gold. *Dashakarma bhandars* store the thousand and one items needed for pujas and other ceremonies. Hole-in-the-wall shops sell bulky account-books bound in red *shalu* (cotton gauze). A Bhatia merchant holds up strings of pearls

quoted in linear measure. 'American diamond' ear-rings and nose-pins glint in the roadside showcase, while the real stuff is locked away in a Chubb safe in the depths of the long narrow shop. The thoroughfare changes its name after a while to Nalini Sheth Street; in the old bazaar this was Mairadanga, where confectioners (*mairas*) sat stirring casein for *sandesh*.

A mobile community, the Subarnabaniks represented the quintessence of Bengali *bania-dom* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Chandra and Sheel families still carry on the bullion business and goldsmith's craft in what was once the only place where gold could be bought in Bengal. Others like the Malliks and Lahas became urban rajas. Away from inquisitive eyes, bare-bodied men sit in



Sonapatti stirring cauldrons of molten gold and silver brought by customers for sale or re-fashioning. During the wedding season, part of Manohar Das Chowk is strung with threads of pure gold for bridal clothes. Kalakar Street deals in baser metals: here salesmen conduct a brisk business in stainless steel ware. Conversation is rudimentary and bargaining hard.

The noise reaches a deafening crescendo as trams rumble along Mahatma Gandhi (earlier Harrison) Road; a flowing human mass out-jostles motor vehicles on this, the city's busiest thoroughfare. Traffic disruption is an everyday feature here: so much so that the local police station often resorts to leg-power when responding to emergencies. After the completion

15.3 Scales-sellers at Barabazar

of Harrison Road, connecting Haora and Shealdah Stations, in 1892, land on either side was rapidly bought up by Marwaris for residential houses with shops on the ground and first floors. The buildings present an unbroken façade, a grotesque mixture of showy stucco at one level with corrugated iron sheets, wood and *darma* above it.

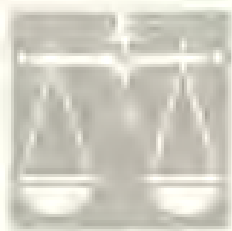
The air in Tulapatti is filled with fluff from the twanging bow-strings of the *dhunari* (cotton-teaser) as we make our way to *Aphing Chourasta* or Opium Crossing, where the river hugged the shoulder of the bazaar, and sailing-boats would load and unload their precious chests of opium. Only the name remains. But even today, somewhere close by, a little door can lead into a damp mossy courtyard where a wizened old man exchanges the proffered two-rupee note for a *chhillum* and a brick. A deep draw, and the head comes to rest on the brick for a half-hour of oblivion. Armenian Street is given over to more respectable additives, tobacco and biri leaves, their scent hanging in the air.

On a Sunday, Barabazar relaxes. The numerous food shops are conspicuously open, but there are no crowds except around the street entertainers, on pavements whose true width is apparent at last. Busloads of businessmen and their families set off on picnics. Pickle and preserve shops dole out dollops of mango *achar* and *gulkhand* in the plastic bags that have replaced the earlier leaves or jars. The ubi-

quitous betel-seller sells the famous Barabazar *pan*. Busy cobblers sit in a row mending slippers and polishing shoes. And even on a Sunday, carpenters and plumbers hang around waiting for work, advertising themselves by the tools of thier trade.

From British times, there existed a plan to beautify north Calcutta; but 'alas the exigencies of commercial activity defeated those early schemes...' Hence Satyanarayan Park is the Bazar's only lung. Here, controversially but no doubt beneficially, Calcutta has set up its first underground market clad in marble and aluminium – 350 shops over a 2-bigha area, still capped by the restored park. Around its well-laid garden are the Satyanarayan and Swetambar Jain Temples, the latter 175 years old. On the main road stands the seven-storeyed Gurdwara Bara Sikh Sangat. Gobindaji, the tutelary deity of the Sheths, was installed at Banshtala in the *thakurbari* built by Jagabandhu Sheth in the early eighteenth century. Worship is still carried on there. Similarly, behind the Old Mint, the bells of the Jagannath Temple of the Basaks have rung in 1990.

When the rest of Calcutta lies submerged during the monsoons, Barabazar sits high above the floods. Perhaps this is symbolic. Money makes the Bazar go round. There is almost a creative energy pulsating in every lane and *patti* of this teeming, squalid, raucous yet mysterious wonderland of wealth.





CALCUTTA'S MARKETS



Raghab Bandyopadhyay

Even before Charnock came to Calcutta, the area was sprinkled with *ganj-es* and bazaars, pre-eminent among them the yarn market of the Sheths and Basaks at Sutanuti. What Charnock set up was a trading centre, an enormous market-town of the East. Even today, people from the interior of Eastern India – and Bangladesh to boot – regard Calcutta as a kind of vast exhibition-cum-sale.

The market that is Calcutta has a twofold identity. One takes physical shape in stalls and buildings. The other is invisible: the traffic in shares, bills, chits, *hundis* and even word of mouth. This article is concerned only with the first.

The Calcutta Municipal Area has 186 markets: 19 directly under the Corporation, the other 167 privately owned. Many of them are over a century old. Some are being demolished and rebuilt; many others should be. It is doubtful whether even a dozen private markets fulfil the municipal rules about open space, easy exit, ventilation and fire precautions. Four markets, two of them municipally owned, have been badly damaged by fire in recent years: New Market, College Street Market, Baithakkhana Market and the wholesale cloth market at Haora. More disturbingly still, some of the smart new private market complexes are equally if not more dangerous. The Corporation has recently been expanding and renovating some of its own markets; but as a group, the markets of Calcutta are one of the

most neglected public amenities in the city.

Yet they are major centres of the city's vitality and its distinctive spirit. Although trade patterns are changing, and a trend towards standardization is beginning to appear, the markets retain much of their century-old *modus operandi*. The most distinctive feature is closeness to the primary producer, through only two or three levels of fairly visible middlemen.

I

To see the process at work, let us begin by looking beyond the ubiquitous fish market of the Calcutta bazaar to the chain of production and supply. 'Fish is universally used by all classes of the inhabitants of Calcutta', remarked an 1822 committee specially set up to develop fish production. Even if fish is priced beyond the reach of 'all classes' today, nothing is more typical of Calcutta markets than the mystique that surrounds its slushy and raucous fish range.

The 1822 report described four functionaries of the fish trade. First came the *jeleys* or actual fishermen, who work in teams: one might contribute the net, another the boat, another nothing but his labour. Their catch was marketed by kingpin middlemen whom the report termed *haldars*, employing watchdog *paikars* to oversee their dealings with the ordinary wholesalers or *nikaris*. These have now been





transmogrified into *dadandars* (financiers who 'book' the catch against advance payment) and commission agents. (The same man might combine both roles.) To these people the fishermen of South 24-Parganas District bring their catch at the great all-night fish market at Port Canning, the gateway to the Sundarbans. Here the commission agents receive the fish from the *jeleys* and auction them to the *paikars*, who are now simply wholesalers carrying the fish to retailers in the markets of Calcutta. The whole process is swift, streamlined yet curiously informal and unkempt in effect, conducted throughout in close physical proximity to the fish. This is the spirit operating in the retail markets of Calcutta as well.

II

To look at it another way, the city's markets retain something of the quality of the weekly village *hat*. Like the *hat*, they are great rumour-

Above:
16.1 Sir Stuart Hogg

Below:
16.2 The spill-over :
an 'informal' pavement
market

Facing page :
Above :
16.3 New Market :the
clock tower

Below :
16.4 Inside the New
Market : from Aparna
Sen's 36
Chowringhee Lane



mills, as politicians have known from the Freedom Struggle to the present day. Like the *hat* too, they thrive in a sprawling and makeshift environment. This is seen in the way the biggest markets – Hatibagan, Shealdah, Maniktala, Gariahat, Lake Market – have two sectors, an inner and an outer. The inner is the official or core market in a planned building; the outer, a spattering of pavement stalls and humble displays very like the village *hat* or even the village fair.

In this outer informal sector, the traders too are often poor men from the villages near Calcutta, sometimes primary producers. Bargaining is part of the basic rules of business: marginally with fish or vegetables, drastically with other wares sold in such surroundings. Hatibagan Bazaar is perhaps most infamous in this regard: in its pavement clothes-stalls, a garment priced at fifty rupees is meant to be bought at twenty-five.

This encompassing, tone-setting informality, the sense of a human relationship underpinning each transaction, is best seen in the markets devoted to fresh food and the simpler daily necessities. It does not appear in the new marts for durables and luxury items, like the Air-Conditioned Market or Vardan Market. Most of Calcutta's great markets – each a local institution – belong to the first category. The New Market combines both roles; with expansion, other municipal markets seem set to do so too.

III

The New Market is so called as being the first municipal market in Calcutta, opened on New Year's Day 1874. It was renamed in 1903 after Sir Stuart Hogg, the Municipal Chairman when the market was founded. 'It is claimed to be the largest well-arranged market in the world,' said the 1966 Corporation Handbook. 'It is said that anything under the sun may be available in the thousands of stalls in this market.'

The stalls actually number about 2,200, chiefly along pathways radiating from a central point. The fresh-food sections are large and celebrated for quality, but the Market attracts visitors from great distances chiefly for its clothes, durables, curios and luxury goods, dispensed in an atmosphere that mingles the

eastern bazaar and the European covered market. The ranges were once strictly demarcated by the type of goods sold; this is still largely the case, though the divisions have grown a little blurred.

The elite nature of New Market and its association with the sahibs raised doubts about its survival after Independence. The traders suffered badly from 1948 to 1960. But the Bengalis gradually made the market their own, even as Calcutta's other communities retained or stepped up their custom.

The revival of trade appears from the going rates for transfer of shops. Many old shopkeepers (chiefly Bengalis) sold out for as little as Rs. 7,000 or Rs. 8,000 in the doldrum years of the 1950s. Now the smallest stall changes hands for at least a lakh of rupees. Some shops still remain in old hands. Sunilkumar Das has been sitting in stall no. G-31 since 1935, as his grandfather Matilal did from the market's inception. The D'Gama family have run their confectionery stall since 1905. But the extensive change of

hands, however sad for sentimentalists, is a sign of the market's inner life, its continuing viability.

IV

College Street Market, built in 1917, is the third oldest municipal market in Calcutta. In its day, it brought new standards in market design and supply of goods within the physical and mental ambit of the common Bengali: New Market had been for the sahibs. College Street Market contrasted favourably with the unpretentious Madhab Babu's Bazaar (next to the University campus and now lost within it). In particular, the garment and shoe shops were much appreciated: no longer did the North Calcutta Bengali need to go to the city centre to buy his footwear.

As this indicates, the market combines its *kuicha* or fresh-food section with what is still the largest range of durable-goods and 'luxury'





shops in old North Calcutta. Of its two entrances, the southern is given over to crockery and kitchenware shops; the eastern to the longest line of shoe shops in the city, interspersed curiously with upmarket shops for wedding sarees and embroidered shawls, jostling with others selling cheap khadi. But even the finest emporiums can no longer satisfy the newer and more sophisticated tastes of the Bengalis. Enterprising North Calcutta's shop more often than not at Gariahat in the south, or at the New Market.

To lend point to this air of *dejà vu*, the cluttered fresh-food market impinges all too visibly on the more dignified sector. The pavements surrounding the market are crowded with makeshift but prosperous stalls. The market has a celebrated *dab-patti* where one has to clamber over green coconut-shells to buy the fruit. In the morning, old women from suburban villages sell bundles of fresh ayurvedic herbs. The fish and vegetable ranges are large but overcrowded. An abortive attempt was made some years ago to take over an adjacent road for new stalls. Nobody used them – at least not for any legitimate purpose. They have now been dismantled and the roadway restored.

In 1917, College Street Market may have been intended as a 'Black-Town' New Market.

Perhaps ironically, its upper storey came to house the Municipal Museum. Shops of all kinds still flourish here; but the dominant spirit, as with most Calcutta bazaars, is frankly close to the *hat* and the fish-market.

V

As an example of the unpromising private market, let us take Tollyganj Bazaar. It was set up by Jugalkumar Mandal over a century ago, when Tollyganj was virtually a village. Today the market is in the hands of a Receiver of the High Court, and is in a sad state of disrepair. The building is dilapidated, the drains and waste-disposal system choked. All chance of improvement is ruled out by the derisory rent rate: only Rs. 100 per day from nearly 400 stalls. But this also means that prices are low, so that trade has not yet been affected despite the deplorable state of the market.

A part of Beliaghata's Rasmani Bazaar collapsed some time ago: it is not impossible that the rest may follow one day. Set up by the famous Rani Rasmani (1793-1861), this market too is over a hundred years old. The clientele is chiefly middle and working-class, factory workers in particular. In the absence of any other big market nearby, over 30,000 custom-

16.5 College Street Market

Facing page
16.6 A wholesale fish-seller



ers flock here every day. There is no space left in the $2\frac{1}{2}$ bighas of the inner or official market; hence the other, 'informal' sector is spreading day by day. From early morning to late afternoon, the market swallows up a good part of Beliaghata Main Road.

New markets have to withstand the same pressure. Azadgarh Market was set up in the Jadabpur area in 1950. Many such markets sprang up in that area around that time to serve the booming refugee population of what were then the southern suburbs. They still spring up to serve new settlements, and often die out again. But Azadgarh has become a full-fledged market, cramped in inadequate space, bursting at the seams to feed the surrounding settlements. It has now become a municipal market: perhaps there will at last be some planned expansion.

VI

Just as such markets spring up and grow in an unplanned manner, their working also seems unplanned. The haphazard air is deceptive, of course, as it needs must be in what is after all a gigantic operation of buying and selling. But the fact remains that the economics of the Calcutta bazaar is still largely the idiosyncratic type of the village *hat*. Prices vary, as do marketing practices – and this despite the fact that nearly all the bazaars are supplied from the same wholesale markets: Haora for fish and certain other perishables, apart from the huge garment market every Tuesday; Shealdah for vegetables, and Barabazar and Raja Katra for a range of goods from baby-food and groceries to ribbons and cosmetics.

The market at Raja Katra was so named as being the property of the Maharaja of Bardhaman. It was once the great distribution centre for goods brought from other states by road, rail and water. The place still keeps up that function to a great extent. In terms of turnover, it is almost certainly Calcutta's biggest wholesale market: hence a tiny booth changes hands here for Rs 5 lakh.

But the range of this wholesale trade is slowly shrinking. In the last two or three decades, new wholesale markets have sprung up in the districts: it keeps transport costs down. On the other hand, regional wholesale markets like Raja Katra are being bypassed by



all-India distribution networks, perhaps centred at Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad or Bangalore. This is particularly true of cloth, spices, and various durables and consumer items. It even applies to perishables. The egg warehouses at Shealdah rely on the produce of Andhra Pradesh. The greater part of Calcutta's fish now comes from South India and Madhya Pradesh – produced, ironically, from spawn sent out from West Bengal in the first place. Railway consignments of fish are sold at the Haora wholesale fish market. Local wholesale trade at Canning and Bagnan has lost out in the competition.

These greater economic trends can only be modified by long-term measures. But direct and immediate attention is required to save Calcutta's markets in the physical sense. Sheer dilapidation apart, the great restraining factor is space. Most of the city's markets – and virtually all those selling food and perishables – are horizontal sprawls. New building projects must be vertical. The ubiquitous promoter



16.7 The
Satyanarayan Park
underground market



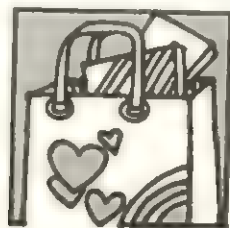
cannot be shut out indefinitely. A storm of protest went up when an underground market was proposed at Satyanarayan Park, the only 'lung' of congested Barabazar. But the authorities vindicated their aim of combining better shopping facilities with enhancement of the environment: the park is now in better shape than before. Similar protests have blocked commercial use of the proposed construction at Rawdon Square, but not the construction itself. The markets, as usual, have lost their claim.

At midnight on 12 December 1985, the

north-west end of New Market caught fire, burning down 447 stalls. Had this not happened, the Corporation might never have pushed through its long-proposed reconstruction of the market, whose first phase is now approaching completion. Architectural redesigning was inevitable, as was vertical expansion of this prime commercial property. The nostalgists were not merely contesting market forces; they were refusing to admit how through age and overcrowding, not unassisted by neglect, the old markets of Calcutta had become potential infernos as well as frequent eyesores.

The new New Market seems poised to blend with the old. Perhaps Calcutta, like Paris, will one day have its new Les Halles. Our only regret will be if, as seems not unlikely, such growth imposes a faceless standardization, opposed to everything the city has always stood for. Its markets embody the same character. The neighbourhood bazaar, the bargain bazaar, the special-spree bazaar, bazaars where men meet as men and not as buying and selling automatons – these have always made up the multiple image of the markets of Calcutta.

(Translated from Bengali)





THE CALCUTTA PORT



Animesh Ray

When the British came to Bengal in the seventeenth century, they found the people prosperously engaged in exporting rice, sugar, silk, cotton, lac and amber. In the heart of Bengal there were mulberry trees nurturing silk-worms, weavers were producing silk and muslin, and the soil upstream was rich in saltpetre. But the approach up the river Hugli to the interior was very difficult. There were treacherous sandbars and other navigational problems connected with a tidal river. The precious British cargo used to be transported by small country boats up the pirate-infested river.

In 1668 the East India Company appointed six young men as apprentice pilots to bring their merchant vessels up the river. Thus started the Bengal Pilot Service. British commercial activity started by setting up a factory in Hugli town in 1658. With the formal acquisition of Sutanuti and Gobindapur in 1698, followed by the establishment of a separate Presidency of Bengal in 1715, Calcutta became the centre of maritime activity.

The original channel of the river on the western or Shibpur side was choked up by the sinking of a ship 'Sumatra', forming a sandbank known as the Sumatra Sand. Consequently, the deep channel of the river was diverted from its original course to the eastern or Calcutta side, and port activity was concentrated near the Fort.

In the early years, Calcutta Port was a river

anchorage where sailing ships would load and unload in midstream. In 1734 there was a great cyclone that damaged a number of vessels. The need for proper port facilities was strongly felt, but no concrete action followed immediately. In 1758 the East India Company started the nucleus of a port. It set up a Marine Establishment, headed by a Marine Attendant reporting to the Marine Board of the Company. The Board was to look after all matters concerning shipping, pilotage, conservancy and traffic in the river Hugli. In 1760 a wharf was constructed in Calcutta for berthing of vessels and cargo operation. In 1765 the Calcutta Council was entrusted with the task of an annual survey of the Hugli for shipping.

During this period, Tolly's Nulla was excavated by Major William Tolly in 1776, while Colonel Watson set up a Marine yard at Khidirpur. In 1790 the first dry dock was built at Bankshall Ghat. By this time the East India Company had monopolized all trade between India and the West. Exports through Calcutta Port were booming. They consisted of cotton, silk, sugar, jute, saltpetre, indigo, etc. Half of India's exports were being shipped through Calcutta Port. British trade with South-East Asia and China was fast picking up: this trade too was mostly conducted through Calcutta.

In 1824 a design was drawn up for constructing wet docks in Tolly's Nulla, but the matter was dropped as the Burmese War intervened. The need for a protected dock system was felt



again in 1842 after a great hurricane destroyed the vessels anchored in the river. The construction of wet docks was proposed once more either at Akra or at Khidirpur. While deliberations were going on as to whether the Port and the City should be placed under a single Trust or two separate ones, another great cyclone hit Calcutta on 5 October 1864, totally wrecking 36 ships and severely damaging 97 more.

The matter could not be delayed any longer. In 1866 the Bengal Legislative Council passed an Act constituting the first River Trust for improving the Port of Calcutta. The Act made the Port a department of the Municipality under a Sub-Committee of Justices. But there was no fund with which to carry out improvements: this vital lack ultimately forced the collapse of the Trust.

The Government did, however, take up the construction of jetties through the Public Works Department in 1867. As these works neared completion, Act V of 1870 was passed, setting up the Calcutta Port Commission.

1869 saw the opening of the Suez Canal, shortening the voyage between England and India by 6,500 kms and giving an impetus to

the use of steam vessels. Internal transportation in India was also opening up to a new growth of trade and commerce, with fast-spreading railways and an inland water transport system. All these commercial activities converged on Calcutta, which became the main doorway between the East and the West.

The construction of four screw-pile jetties for Calcutta Port was started by the PWD in 1868 and completed in August 1869 at a cost of Rs 5 lakh. The jetties, with cranes and sheds, came into operation in October 1869. Such was the inauguration of the shore-based facilities later named the Calcutta Jetties, which were to be the main infrastructure of Calcutta Port for the next few decades. During the next few years, thought was given to the construction of more port facilities including wet docks. Diamond Harbour, a possible competing site, was rejected because of its distance from the centre of commercial activity. Similarly Port Canning, which acquired a rail link in 1863 as well as number of jetties and sheds, was given up as the Matla river was becoming choked owing to inadequate headwater supply.

In 1884 Khidirpur was selected as the site of

17.1 *The first vessel entering the Khidirpur docks*



the proposed wet docks. Construction was completed in 1892. In the meantime, the Petroleum Wharf at Bajbaj came up in 1886. In the initial years, the Docks were not much in use; their chief function was to house vessels put back on account of accidents or laid up because of depression in trade. From 1898-99, however, the position changed. In that year 537 ships with a total tonnage of 2 million used the Docks, compared to 204 ships with a tonnage of only half a million using the Jetties.

The Docks gradually expanded until, by the outbreak of the war, they came to comprise 18 general berths and 10 coal berths, all being fully utilized. Another five berths were built around this time to cope with the rise in import trade, particularly in Java sugar and Burma rice. There was increasing export trade in wheat, seeds, and hides and skins. A tea warehouse, hide warehouses and other warehouse were coming up fast at Hide Road and the adjacent areas. To provide more accommodation, a large area to the south of the Khidirpur Docks was acquired for construction of a new dock system; a long strip of additional river frontage was also acquired. The Port took over light-houses, light vessels, survey vessels, buoys, etc. as required for safe navigation in the channels.

Here a few words need to be said about the pioneer administrators of the Calcutta Port during its formative period. The first Port Commission consisted of nine persons. The number of Commissioners was later increased to thirteen, and in 1887 a partial elective system was introduced by which four Commissioners were elected by the Chamber of Commerce, one by the trade associations and one by the Corporation. By 1905 the number of Commissioners had increased to sixteen. V.H. Schalch was the first Chairman of the Port Commissioners. After Independence N.M. Ayyar became the first Indian Chairman. The Vice-Chairman was the whole-time Chief Executive of the Port from 1870 till 1921.

Most of the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen were outstanding administrators who, by their pioneering efforts, made Calcutta one of the leading ports of the world. The two legendary figures from the early years were Captain Kyd, Chief Engineer of the Company, who started the first dockyard in Calcutta, and Colonel Watson, who started the first marine yard at Khidirpur, opening up shipbuilding activity in Calcutta. Khidirpur is sometimes held to be and



Watganj certainly is named after these two illustrious persons respectively. Some pioneers of Indian commerce who were associated with the Calcutta Port during the early British period were Maharaja Durgacharan Laha (Law), the first Indian member of the Port Commissioners, Raja Hrishikesh Laha (Law) and Sir Umeshchandra Banerji (Woomesh Chunder 'W.C.' Bonnerji).

17.2 The Calcutta Jetties in 1880

The traffic in Calcutta Port increased very fast, as the hinterland was expanding and economic activities were growing. The need was felt for an additional impounded dock. Accordingly, a deeper dock with a bigger and longer entrance, King George Dock (later named Netaji Subhash Dock) was constructed in 1928.

During the Second World War, commercial traffic fell from about 10 million tons (MT) to about 7 MT. In 1947-48 the total traffic at the Port was 6.95 million tons (MT) – 2.48 MT of imports and 4.47 MT of exports. It gradually went up, reaching 11.06 MT in 1964-5. Thereafter, traffic started declining, falling to its lowest in recent times at 6 MT in 1970-71. It has since been rising, reaching 14.2 MT in 1988-89.

After Independence large-scale renovation, modernization and expansion programmes for the Port were taken up. During the First Five-Year Plan, the major tasks were to replace the facilities worn out during the war and acquire new craft for the Port. During the Second Plan, apart from renovating the old



17.3 Heavy crane in
Netaji Subhash Dock

facilities, two general cargo berths were built, one berth converted into a heavy lift berth and another into a semi-mechanized iron-ore exporting berth, and various mechanical appliances acquired.

In the Third Plan attention was specially concentrated on river conservancy, in the context of the falling draught of the river. During this period, the Farakka Barrage Project was approved and a Master Plan drawn up for a deep-water dock at Haldia for large oil tankers and bulk carriers. The Fourth Plan included schemes for dry dock modernization. The riverside Haldia oil jetty was commissioned in 1968.

The Fifth Plan included schemes for modernization of cargo handling facilities and replacement of port craft. The plan for Haldia (officially part of Calcutta Port) involved completing construction of the dock systems including equipment, roads and railways. During the Sixth Plan, emphasis was laid on the acquisition of equipment, replacement of craft and vessels, mechanization of container-handling facilities, dredging and river training works.

During the Seventh Plan the major schemes undertaken were the construction of guidewalls at Nayachar Island, extensive river training works, the addition of an oil berth and a general cargo berth at Haldia, and replacement of vessels and equipment. The Eighth Plan schemes are for the augmentation of cargo handling facilities, completing the construction of additional berths, and modernization of facilities.

Calcutta Port was the premier port of India till 1955. In 1950-51, out of the total traffic of 19.3 MT at all the major ports of India, Calcutta handled 7.6 MT. In 1955-56, it received 8 MT out of the total all-India traffic of 23.9 MT. In 1964-65 the total went up to 48.4 MT and Calcutta handled 11.1 MT. In 1988-89, Calcutta had 14.22 MT as against 142 MT for India as a whole.

In the 1970s, traffic at Calcutta Port did not measure up to the projections made. There were many reasons: limited draught in the river, the increasing size of vessels, and the fact that industrialization of the hinterland was not taking place as projected. General cargo traffic declined as the economic development of the region slowed down. This was a very depressing shortfall.

The Seventh Plan projections were more realistic. The actual traffic figures were matching the projections, which varied between 11 and 12 MT. The projection for 1994-95 is 24 MT.

A very significant recent development in the traffic pattern is containerization. The Commission of Major Ports (1970) recommended that one port on the West Coast, Bombay (Jawaharlal Nehru Port), and another on the East Coast, Calcutta (Haldia), should be developed as container ports. At Haldia, a full-fledged container terminal with proper equipment came up in 1978-79. Traffic was slow to pick up, but now it is growing fast. From 558 TEUs (units of containers) in Calcutta and 1,318 TEUs in Haldia in 1978-79, the figures have reached 50,815 in Calcutta and 15,901 in Haldia in 1988-89. The projection for 1991-92 for Calcutta and Haldia together is 1 lakh units, and in 1999-2000 it is expected to be about 3 lakh units.

Along with the development of container traffic, a new concept has come up: the inland container depot (ICD). ICDs situated in the interior stuff and destuff containers, while the ports only handle them as transshipment. Calcutta-Haldia is now linked with Amingaon ICD in Assam for tea traffic. More ICDs are likely to come up in the interior with linkage to Calcutta Port.

There are many areas demanding improvement of facilities or entirely new projects. The Calcutta Dock Complex requires thorough renovation. All the port craft – pilot vessels, despatch vessels, survey and research vessels,

tugs, etc. – require replacement. The port railways, the roads in and around the docks, and the storage sheds require extensive repairs and improvement. The facilities at Haldia, created about a decade back, will be requiring similar replacement, repairs, etc. within a few years. The Bajbaj Petroleum Wharf, which is more than 100 years old, also requires modernization. All these works in Calcutta, Haldia and Bajbaj will have to be carried out by the end of the century and may cost about Rs 500 crores.

Calcutta Port has to trim itself, keeping in view the changing volume and pattern of trade. The riverside jetties have become very old and redundant. The Calcutta Jetties, where the Port's activities started in its earliest period, ceased to be functional in 1965-66 because of the bore tide and siltation. The sheds have been demolished, and the land available along the river front is now likely to be used for the Circular Railway, the widening of Strand Road, the construction of offices and commercial complexes and the creation of promenades. Similarly, the riverside Garden Reach Jetties have grown redundant and been de-commissioned. The available area might be used as wharves for inland water transport. The labour force of the Port numbered 42,946 in 1967. It now stands reduced to 25,761.

Calcutta Port is linked with the inland waterways system, which is likely to provide a spurt in its traffic in the near future. With the declaration of National Waterways linking Calcutta-Haldia with the north-east and the north through the Brahmaputra and the Ganga respectively, the international, coastal and inland traffic are likely to increase significantly in Calcutta-Haldia.

A question which has agitated the minds of all planners since the setting up of the Port is the navigability of the river Bhagirathi or Hugli. The Bhagirathi had gradually silted up at its source, and remained practically cut off from the Ganga except during the monsoon. In the absence of adequate headwater supply, the sand and silt carried by the river were being deposited in the river bed. The play of tidal water, having a fast flood but slow ebb, was making the river shallower and shallower. To save the Calcutta Port, on 21 May, 1975 the Farakka Barrage Project was commissioned to ensure



adequate supply of headwater to the river.

17.4 Container handling at Haldia

Calcutta is 200 kms from the sandheads in the sea, and navigation was extremely difficult with fifteen sand bars. The depth of water over the bars fluctuated with the volume of the tide. With the commissioning of the Farakka Barrage all the twelve bars above Haldia, except the governing Balari Bar, have gradually acquired better depths, and the occurrence of bore tides has also gradually declined.

In addition to increasing headwater supply from Farakka, extensive river training works were also taken up to ensure that the river channel remained functional. Dredging also continued. The annual dredging requirement is 15 million cubic metres, costing about Rs 30 crores. Capital projects for the improvement of the river's navigability include the construction of a 2.8-km-long guidewall in the river from the Nayachar island near Haldia, and capital dredging – the two items together costing about Rs 80 crores.

Calcutta Port has been meeting challenge after challenge from its very inception 300 years ago. Its range of functions has varied widely with the economic condition of its hinterland. Once the premier port of India, it is now coming up again after a period of decline. The whole of eastern and north-eastern India is its hinterland. The development of this region is concomitant with the development of Calcutta Port, and the Port has undertaken large-scale development works to promote the economic prosperity of its hinterland.



CALCUTTA'S POWER SUPPLY



Gautam Gupta

The history of electricity in Calcutta begins effectively in 1899. Before that, electricity had been generated on a small scale for display or private luxury; but commercial generation commenced on 17 April 1899 under the Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation (CESC). The Company, originally called the Indian Electric Company Ltd., had been set up in London in 1897. Its first generating station was at Emambag Lane near Prinsep Street in central Calcutta.

In the early years, electricity was treated with suspicion, and had to be popularized through advertisements and even door-to-door canvassers. As late as 1940, an advertisement extolled the virtues of this 'modern wizard'. Who could imagine that three decades later, Calcuttans would be crying for more electricity, and compelled against their will to return to candles and paraffin lamps? These had become part of life in Calcutta in the 1970s, more so in the early 1980s. They are still in demand despite a marked improvement in power supply. The city has learnt to live without electricity. The lesson will remain useful in the foreseeable future.

Calcutta's history of power shortage is linked to its growing dependence on the import of power, by government policy, from areas outside the city limits and the jurisdiction of the CESC. Between 1899 and 1957, the power needed by Calcutta was generated by the CESC alone. Its first big power station was set up at

Kashipur (Cossipore) in 1912, followed by the Southern Station at Garden Reach in 1926 and the Mulajore Station in the northern suburbs in 1940. The old Kashipur Station was replaced by the New Kashipur Station, commissioned in 1950. Basically, the Mulajore, Kashipur and Southern Stations were set up to cater respectively to the northern, central and southern parts of the CESC area. Interconnection between the three stations was only marginal, but has now been strengthened to tide over emergencies in the present problematic state of power supply.

It may also be noted here that the CESC still retains a large proportion of outdated DC connections. AC power began to be supplied in 1910 from a plant at Ultadanga (now a substation), and conversion of DC lines to AC began in the 1940s. But the pace of conversion has been slow, and much current generated as AC is still converted for DC supply.

After Independence, power generation was chiefly entrusted to state agencies all over the country. Only a few private companies, including the CESC, were allowed to function, mainly because of their excellent record of performance. But the CESC's growth was halted, as it was decreed that the city's growing demand for power would be met by imports from the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) and the West Bengal State Electricity Board (WBSEB). The era of power shortage was basically caused by the failure of these two

18.1 Old advertisement of the CESC



agencies, especially the latter, to honour their commitments of power supply to Calcutta.

In 1947, the total generating capacity in the country was only some 1,400 megawatts (MW), of which CESC accounted for 200 MW. By the end of the Seventh Five-Year Plan in 1990, the nation's total capacity will be around 65,000 MW – an increase of well over four and a half thousand times – but the CESC's capacity will only be 600 MW, or three times that of 1947.

It was the DVC that first exported power to Calcutta. On 18 April 1957, the first power from DVC sources flowed into Calcutta from the agency's newly installed substation at Haora. Supply from the WBSEB commenced on 13 May 1964. The CESC now draws power from WBSEB at four receiving stations – at Garden Reach, Belur, Kasba and Titagarh – and from the DVC at Haora.

There are two other power-generating agencies in West Bengal, the National Thermal Power Corporation under the Union Government and the Durgapur Projects Ltd. under the State Government. The recently-set-up West Bengal Power Development Corporation is now sharing some of the WBSEB's responsibilities. These agencies have no direct links with the CESC, but the power they supply to the WBSEB can in turn be transmitted to the CESC area through the common grid. There are also certain parts of the Calcutta metropolitan area, notably Bidhan Nagar and a large part of the suburbs on the east bank of the river, that are served directly by the WBSEB.

The agreement with the DVC has remained static, for a supply of 95 MW. The WBSEB, on the other hand, was expected to increase its contribution to the CESC as demand grew. With this scheme in mind, the CESC was restrained in the 1950s from adding to its own capacity. In any case, its licence was due to expire at the end of the 1970s. There was no point in its investing in new generating capacity.

In 1961, however, Calcutta experienced its first power cuts as imports did not match the growing demand. From the early 1970s, power cuts became a regular feature, increasing steadily till 1983-84. Since then the position has as steadily improved, although power cuts persist to a certain degree. The balance between demand and supply is delicate at best, and easily disturbed by mishaps or a sudden rise in



TABLE 1 Power Supply and Deficit in the CESC System

18.2 Victoria House :
The CESC
headquarters

Year	Energy from CESC's generation	Units imported	Total	Estimated loss owing to power cuts
	(million units)	(million units)	(million units)	(million units)
1973-74	1,552	1,505	3,057	150
1974-75	1,480	1,456	2,936	290
1975-76	1,676	1,572	3,248	150
1976-77	1,510	1,849	3,359	110
1977-78	1,515	1,773	3,288	230
1978-79	1,502	1,750	3,252	330
1979-80	1,500	1,659	3,159	520
1980-81	1,530	1,636	3,166	590
1981-82	1,530	1,810	3,340	460
1982-83	1,565	1,763	3,328	540
1983-84	1,820	1,541	3,361	620
1984-85	2,117	1,469	3,586	470
1985-86	2,252	1,648	3,900	330
1986-87	2,334	1,717	4,051	250
1987-88	2,098	2,043	4,141	190
1988-89	2,200	2,035	4,235	170

(estimated)

demand. Table 1 shows the extent of generation, import and deficit in power supply from 1973-74 onwards.

The growing deficit forced a reluctant State Government to allow the CESC to install a fresh 50 MW unit at its New Kashipur plant. This was the prelude to a major policy decision. As the Government understood that it was



Left :
18.3 The Titagarh
power station

Right :
18.4 The Hugli
Tunnel

beyond the capacity of the WBSEB to meet the demand of Calcutta, the CESC was encouraged to set up a new power station at Titagarh, between Mulajore and New Kashipur. This went on stream in 1983. Since then the Southern Station has been closed down, and a new plant is being erected on the site. Very recently, there has also been a proposal for a large new plant still further south, in or near Bajbaj.

Simultaneously, the operating licence of the CESC was extended from 1980 to 2000. Its control and holding were progressively India-nized. In 1978-79, the company formally became the Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation (India) Limited.

On 14 November 1974, the Power Secretary of the West Bengal Government wrote to the Managing Director of the CESC communicating the change in government policy. A significant sentence in this letter says, 'Government is expecting to receive tentative proposals indicating the line of planning for the second phase of expansion programme which will ensure self-sufficiency.' One wonders, however, if either the present State Government or the CESC itself are seriously aiming to make Calcutta self-sufficient in power. In 1990, the peak demand for power in Calcutta is estimated at 800 MW. The CESC will generate only half this amount, the rest being imported from the DVC and the WBSEB. There need not be any shortfall if all three agencies fulfil their commitments.



The Hugli Tunnel

One of Calcutta's most notable engineering landmarks is unfortunately invisible, lying as it does below the Hugli River. Between 1929 and 1931, the CESC bored a 690-yard-long tunnel, 90 feet below ground level, to carry its transmission lines from the Southern Generating Station in Garden Reach to the west or Haora bank at the Shibpur Botanic Garden. Today it conveys lines carrying power from the WBSEB and DVC plants to the CESC system.

An achievement in itself, given the state of technology in that age and the nature of Calcutta's soil, the tunnel was valued still more for its promise of future development. The journal *Property* commented: '...there will be ample data for the design of the first tube railway ... We may even visualize the possibility of future road tunnels to supply the second and third Hooghly crossing.'

The second Hugli crossing, of course, is about to be effected by a high-level bridge. The Metro engineers meanwhile have achieved major feats of tunnelling in the Shyambazar-Belgachhia area. But by its pioneer status as well as its extent, the CESC tunnel deserves special mention.

There are, however, many problems and uncertainties. It is commonly found that while the peak demand hours witness a deficit in supply, there is even some surplus in the lean demand hours. This is a common problem in any power system that is overwhelmingly thermal, for thermal power stations cannot adjust their generation to sharp fluctuations in demand. They are best run as base load stations, while hydroelectric units supplement them as peaking stations as they can be switched on and off at short notice, or even have their generation level controlled according to necessity. The CESC has no hydel power station, while the hydel capacities of both the DVC and the WBSEB are nominal.

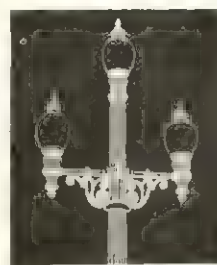
Even with thermal plants, the technology that the CESC used in its old stations allowed heavy fluctuations in generating to match the demand curve. But this required high-grade coal, whose supply can no longer be assured. With the rise in demand, the size of generating units is also going up, making it more difficult to vary the generation level according to need.

The one and a half decades of darkness in the state from the early 1970s hit Calcutta badly. In a system that saw a peak demand of 600 MW,

the shortfalls touched 300 MW at times. This was mainly due to simultaneous breakdown of several generating units or breakdowns in the transmission system. A shortfall of over 100 MW was a regular feature for years. Restrictions were imposed on the use of energy in industry and, to some extent, in agriculture. In fact, the government gradually adopted the policy of protecting domestic consumers as far as possible at the cost of industrial consumers.

To keep up a modicum of supply at any cost, routine closures for overhauling of the plants were often dispensed with, paving the way for more breakdowns in the future. Nowadays routine maintenance is being enforced more regularly. But this in turn means that units have to be shut down by rotation; and if breakdowns occur as well, there can again be massive power cuts. The city – and the state – faced such a situation in early 1989, especially as the demand had gone up since the last new unit was commissioned in the state, in 1987.

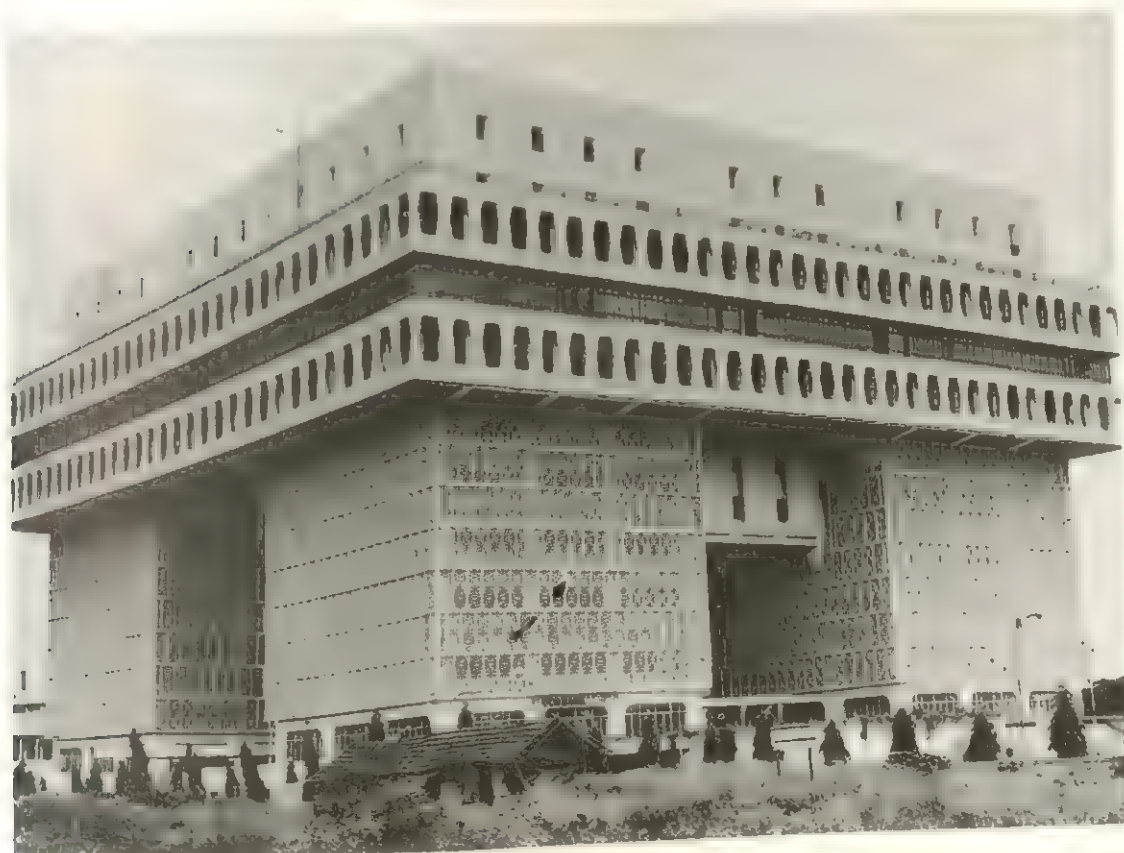
Generally speaking, however, there has been a perceptible improvement. Through 1987 and 1988, there were no power cuts on most days. Restrictions were also withdrawn or moderated. But what about the future?



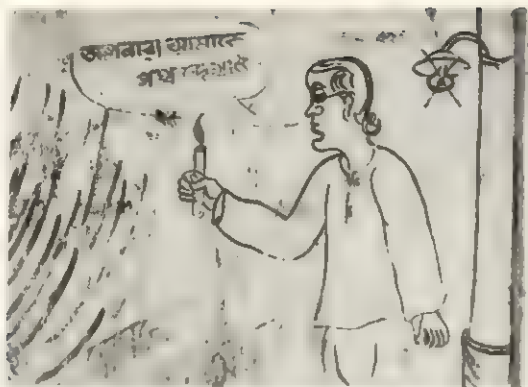
18.5 The CESC logo

Below :

18.6 Bidyut Bhavan, Bidhan Nagar : the headquarters of the West Bengal State Electricity Board



18.7 'Show me the way': graffiti on loadshedding



It can be safely predicted that the situation will remain the same till the beginning of the 1990s. While a number of new generating units will be commissioned in the state, the demand for power is not expected to rise very fast. The growth rate of demand in Calcutta is already very slow; in the industrial sector, there is hardly any demand growth at all. This is mainly because of the restrictions on setting up new industries in the Calcutta metropolitan area, particularly the inner city. Moreover, the traditional jute and engineering units are going through bad days, and many of them have already closed down.

Unless industrial demand grows elsewhere in the state, the overall growth in demand will be slow. The demand-supply gap will therefore be largely within control. It is another question what this slow rate of industrial growth might mean for the state's economy. By an opposite argument, recent hopes of industrial revival pose challenges of power supply. And needless to say, power cuts will reappear whenever the power agencies fail to generate as they should.

Neither the State Government nor the CESC finds it feasible to make Calcutta self-sufficient in power. Table 2 shows the total capacity of the power-generating units in operation and under construction in West Bengal. There is virtually no scope for setting up large new power stations in the CESC's licensed area. On the other hand, the state power agencies have ambitious schemes for capacity expansion.

TABLE 2 Power-generating Units in West Bengal, with Capacity

A. In Operation

CESC	Mulajore: 5 units \times 30 MW
	New Kashipur 2 units \times 50 MW
	2 units \times 30 MW
	Titagarh: 4 units \times 60 MW
WBSEB	Bandel: 4 units \times 75 MW
	1 unit \times 210 MW
	Santalidih: 4 units \times 120 MW
	Kolaghat: 2 units \times 210 MW
	Gas turbines: 5 units \times 20 MW (2 at Kasba, 2 at Haldia, 1 at Shiliguri)
	Hydel power: 41 MW from small stations
DPL	2 units \times 30 MW
	3 units \times 75 MW
	1 unit \times 110 MW
DVC	Waria: 1 unit \times 140 MW
	1 unit \times 210 MW
NTPC	Farakka: 3 units \times 210 MW

B. Under Construction

CESC	New Southern: 2 units \times 67.5 MW
WBSEB	Kolaghat: 4 units \times 210 MW
	Bakreshwar: 3 units \times 210 MW
DVC	Mejia: 3 units \times 210 MW
NTPC	Farakka: 2 units \times 500 MW

C. Planned or Proposed

NTPC	Farakka: 1 unit \times 500 MW
CESC	Bajbaj: 2 units \times 250 MW, perhaps to be followed by a third such unit.

They should be in a position to meet the demand growth in Calcutta as well as in the areas they serve directly. The latter areas are in any case growing more and more important even within the Calcutta Metropolitan District.

At least half the city's demand will have to be met from imports in the coming years. Though dependence on imports caused most of the suffering in earlier years, there is no reason to panic. If exporting agencies perform well, there will be enough power for Calcutta.



TOWN PLANNING IN CALCUTTA: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE



Monidip Chatterjee

It seems the pattern of Calcutta's development was chaotic from the inception of the city. Planned settlement was not a priority for either the foreign traders or their native associates and beneficiaries: they viewed the city solely as a place for commercial gain by the quickest means. In June 1766, Mrs Kindersley wrote about the city she had come to live in :

It does not appear much worthy describing, for although it is large, with a great many good houses in it, it is as awkward a place as can be conceived; and so irregular that it looks as if all the houses had been thrown up in the air, and fallen down again by an accident as they now stand. People keep constantly building; and every one who can procure a piece of ground to build a house upon, consults his own taste and convenience without any regard to the beauty or regularity of the town. Besides, the appearance of the best houses is spoiled by the little straw huts, and such sort of incumbrances, which are built up by the servants for themselves to sleep in; so that all the English part of the town, which is the largest, is a confusion of very superb and very shoddy houses, dead walls, straw huts, warehouses, and I know not what.

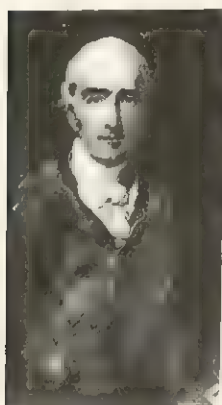
What is remarkable is that so much of Mrs Kindersley's remarks should still be applicable today to the greater part of the vastly grown Calcutta Metropolitan District (CMD), and particularly the Metropolitan Fringe Area. This article traces the history of such a situation, and the nature and success of recurrent plans for a more ordered city.

The Early Growth of the Town and Suburbs

'The first English settlement at Sutanuti,' says C.R. Wilson, 'seems to have consisted of mud and straw hovels with a few masonry buildings. ... The renewed settlement established by Charnock in 1690 was of the same nature, but as time went on, the number of masonry buildings increased.'

Although Charnock set up his factory in 1690, the British obtained legal possession of the land only in 1698 by the Sanad granted by the Nawab Azim-us-Shan. The total area, covering the three villages of Sutanuti, Gobindapur and Kalikata as well as the relatively built-up 'Bazaar Calcutta', comprised 5,077 bighas or 1,692 acres. Only 280.6 acres (16.6 per cent) of this was at all highly inhabited or urban; the remaining 1,411.4 acres were suburban or rural, having plantations and even paddy-fields. Table 1 gives a detailed break-up of the total area and land use.

It is amazing how in less than three hundred years, this unassuming settlement developed into a massive conurbation, the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration, covering 210,500 acres by 1981. In Table 2, an attempt has been made to collate information from different sources into a comprehensive table charting the evolution of the old town and suburbs into today's metropolitan area. The physical development and



19.1 Lord Wellesley

growth characteristics of the settlement are sufficiently clear from this table.

According to A.K. Ray in his *Short History of Calcutta*, the city had a built-up area of only 216 acres in 1706. In 1707 this had increased to 280.6 acres (see Table 1). Part of the increase may be due to growth and the remainder to different sources of information. We also find, in line with C.R. Wilson's observation quoted above, that there were only eight *pukka* or masonry structures out of 8,008, the rest being thatched huts or similar structures. Likewise, there were only two roads in the settlement in 1706.

Even up to 1901, the predominance of huts over masonry structures is very evident. No detailed information on huts has been available since that date, but it is plain to see that hut-like structures are prevalent even today in the extensive areas designated as *bustees* or slums. There are some 3,000 *bustees* in the Calcutta Metropolitan Area, and 1,015 in the city proper covering 15,166 acres or about 59 per cent of the municipal area. In this inner zone, the slum-dwellers numbered 1.67 million in 1981 out of a total population of 3.3 million. These *bustees*, which pose the biggest problem and challenge for the development of today's metropolis, are the legacy of the city's colonial past

with its sharp division between the rulers and the ruled, English mansions and 'native' hovels.

Given such a skewed housing situation from the earliest times, and the generally poor physical development of the city, we can scarcely expect any informed approach whatsoever to the principles of town planning. We have to wait till the beginning of the nineteenth century for some serious attempts to redress the malady through organized public and private intervention.

The Nineteenth Century: Wellesley's Minutes

The Marquis of Wellesley, Governor-General of India from 1798 to 1805, must be hailed for his signal achievement in forming an architectural and town planning policy commensurate with the status of the settlement that had, by his day, become 'the seat of supreme authority in India'. His architectural policy was epitomized in the Government House (now Raj Bhavan), whose foundation stone was laid in February 1799. This may also be said to mark the foundation of the imperial city of Calcutta. The Company's Court of Directors in London did not share Wellesley's views. He went directly against this 'sordid mercantile spirit'

TABLE 1 Land use in the 'Three Towns' and 'Bazaar Calcutta'
(Based on *Bengal Consultations*, June 1707)
(In acres: percentage in parenthesis)

	<i>Sutanuti</i>	<i>Town Calcutta</i>	<i>Bazar Calcutta</i>	<i>Gobindapur</i>	<i>Total Area</i>
Houses	44.7 (7.9)	82.8 (14.5)	133.9 (82.3)	19.2 (4.9)	280.6 (16.6)
Tracks and paths	24.1 (4.3)	—	—	—	24.1 (1.4)
Agricultural use	280.4 (49.7)	335.7 (58.6)	20.2 (12.4)	268.8 (68.5)	905.1 (53.5)
Gardens	49.1 (8.7)	23.4 (4.1)	6.7 (4.1)	19.7 (5.0)	98.9 (5.8)
Ditches	3.5 (0.6)	4.2 (0.7)	1.7 (1.0)	0.4 (0.1)	5.8 (0.3)
Jungle	162.4 (28.8)	121.3 (21.2)	—	27.9 (7.1)	311.6 (18.5)
Waste ground	—	9.1 (1.6)	0.3 (0.2)	56.5 (14.4)	65.9 (3.9)
Total Area	564.2 (100)	572.5 (100)	162.8 (100)	392.5 (100)	1692 Acres (100)

TABLE 2 Growth of Calcutta Town, Suburbs and Metropolitan Area 1706-1981
(All area in acres and population in thousands)

Year	Old Town Area ¹ (Urban)	Rural Area ²	Added Area ³	Total Town or Municipal Area ⁴	Fort William and Munda	City Suburbs	Metropolitan Suburbs ⁵	Total Area	Population ⁶ (Town or Municipal)	Population Density (Persons per acre)	Total No. of Houses ⁸	Masonry	Huts and Others	Population ⁹ (Urban Agglomeration)	Population Density in Urban Agglomeration (Persons per acre)	Population (Calcutta Metropolitan District or Standard Urban Area) ¹⁰
1706	216	1,476		1,692				1,692	22	13	8,008	8	8,000			
1742	448	2,781		3,229				3,229			14,868	121	14,747			
1756	704	2,525		3,229				3,229	105	33	14,948	498	14,450			
1794	3,714			3,714	1,283			4,997			14,771	1,114	13,657			
1850	3,714			3,714	1,283			4,997	413	83	62,565	13,120	49,445			
	3,754			3,754	1,283			5,037	430	85	39,756	16,896	22,860			
	3,754			3,754	1,283	14,413		19,450	612	122	34,534	15,128	19,406			
	3,754			3,754	1,283				682		73,421	26,070	47,352			
	3,754	8,096		11,850	1,283									1,510		
	3,766	8,188		11,954	1,283	6,720		19,957	848 ⁷	64	119,369	40,342	79,027			
1911	4,129	7,825		11,954	1,283	6,400		19,637	896 ⁷	68		39,611		1,745		
1921	4,129	7,825		11,954	1,283	19,644		32,881	908 ⁷	69	169,083			1,885		
1931	4,129	15,972		20,101	1,283	11,497		34,164	1,221 ⁷	57	203,231			2,139		
1941	4,128	13,903		18,121	1,283			19,404	2,167	112	366,061			3,621		
1951	4,248	13,888		18,136	1,283			19,419	2,698	139	593,007			4,670		
1961	4,248	20,168		24,416	1,283			25,699	2,927	114				5,984		6,617
1971	4,248	20,168		24,416	1,283		184,801	210,500	3,149	123				7,420	35	8,297
1981	4,248	20,168		24,416	1,283		184,801	210,500	3,305	129				9,194	44	10,114

Sources: Upto 1850, all information from A.K. Ray, *A Short History of Calcutta* (1902). From 1876, information from relevant Census Reports.

Notes: 1. The Old Town area corresponded generally to the area bounded by the Maratha Ditch or Circular Road.

2. Mentioned by A.K. Ray.

3. The area outside the Old Town, added to the Town and later to the Calcutta Municipal Area.

4. The Calcutta Municipal Area is first mentioned in the 1911 Census.

5. The area outside the Calcutta Municipal Area but within the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration.

6. From 1876 onwards, explicitly includes the 'Special Charges' (Fort, Port and Canals).

7. The 1901, 1911 and 1921 figures exclude the population of what were then the separate Municipalities of Kashipur-Chitpur, Maniktala and Tollyganj (South Suburban). These are included from 1931. The 1931 figure also includes Garden Reach, which was again made a separate municipality by 1941.

8. Figures upto 1901 from A.K. Ray and after that from Census Reports.

9. The concept of the Urban Agglomeration first appeared in 1971; but the population of the present Calcutta Urban Agglomeration area since 1901 was worked out in the 1981 Census Report.

10. The population of the area covered by the present Calcutta Metropolitan District or Standard Urban Area since 1961 was worked out in the 1981 Census Report.

and proclaimed: 'I wish India to be ruled from a palace, not from a country house; with the ideas of a Prince, not with those of a retail trader in muslins and indigo.'

In a word, Wellesley was the first Governor-General who looked beyond commercial interests alone and conceived of public works as an important area of government activity. His Minutes of 16 June 1803 is a historic document,

evinced the British Government's first genuine concern for the ordered development of Calcutta and setting in motion the actual course of planning and development over the major part of the nineteenth century. It deserves to be quoted in full; but as this is obviously not possible, we must be content with a summary.

The Minutes commenced with a long, frank account of the defects of Calcutta's 'public

drains and water-courses'. It also noted the unplanned and chaotic state of the markets, slaughter-houses and burial-grounds. Further,

In those quarters of the town occupied principally by the native inhabitants, the houses have been built without order or regularity, and the streets and lanes have been formed without attention to the health, convenience, or safety of the inhabitants.

Hence

It is a primary duty of Government to provide for the health, safety and convenience of the inhabitants of this great town, by establishing a comprehensive system for the improvement of the roads, streets, public drains, and water-courses; and by fixing

The Nawab's Garden City

One of Calcutta's most interesting experiments in town planning was carried out in the last century by Wajid Ali Shah, the deposed Nawab of Awadh, in the home of his exile at Garden Reach from 1856. Garden Reach, originally the resort of wealthy Europeans, was so named from the Botanic Garden across the river; but the Nawab truly made it a planned garden city with a population of over 40,000. The British had allotted him only three houses; but he built more, in a row from north to south, all set in spacious grounds interspersed with gardens. The Nawab's own garden, laid out geometrically, was open to the public, as was his menagerie. The township was called a second Lucknow, and a 'Garden of Eden on Earth', that both Indians and Europeans would visit and marvel at.

On Wajid Ali's death in 1887, his property was sold, and the site taken over by jute mills, tidal docks and the offices of the Bengal Nagpur Railway. The architectural influence of his efforts appears chiefly in the stucco work, introduced by expert artisans from Lucknow and prominent in Calcutta buildings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But the total sense of town design embodied in Wajid Ali Shah's Metiabruz was sadly ignored by the European planners of the age.

permanent rules for the construction and distribution of the houses and public edifices, and for the regulation of nuisances of every kind.

The appearance and beauty of the town are inseparably connected with the health, safety, and convenience of the inhabitants, and every improvement which shall introduce a greater degree of order, symmetry, and magnificence in the streets, roads, ghauts, and wharfs, public edifices, and private habitations, will tend to ameliorate the climate, and to secure and promote every object of a just and salutary system of police.

Wellesley therefore proposed a Committee of thirty members and invested them with ten specific tasks. Four related to the survey, resuscitation and maintenance of 'drains and water-courses', and others to the burial-grounds; to the markets and slaughter-houses; to 'all existing nuisances' and how to remove them; to a survey for new roads; and to any other 'plans and regulations' the Committee might suggest. Finally, the Minutes observed that the funds for these improvements

may be raised without subjecting the honourable Company to any considerable expense, and without imposing a heavy tax on the inhabitants of Calcutta. It will certainly be the duty of Government to contribute in a just proportion to any expense which may be requisite for the purpose of completing the improvements of the town.

It is significant that Wellesley should commit the Government to contributing even a part of the funds, although assuring the 'honourable Company' of not drawing heavily on its purse. This too is historic: the first proclamation that the development of the town is the responsibility of the Government. Calcutta must thank Lord Wellesley for initiating the process of government-sponsored development of the city.

The Town Improvement Committee

As the Minutes directed, a Town Improvement Committee was set up – also known as the Lottery Committee from its chief means of obtaining funds. Over a period of thirty years up to 1836, the Committee gave Calcutta its first taste of town planning and improvement in accordance with the best canons of contemporary Europe.

The finest application of such conceptions was the creation of a great central road running north and south through the whole length of

Calcutta, forming a ground axis of the town, with open squares and large reservoirs of water at stated intervals, chiefly on the east side at the crossings with what were then the major arterial roads running east and west. Thus there came into being the long stretch of Wood Street, Wellesley Street (Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road today), Wellington Street (Nirmal Chandra Street), College Street and Cornwallis Street (Bidhan Sarani). It gave the city a clear linear north-south direction, and opened up a long stretch of the congested 'native town' of north Calcutta. The major public activity centres and places of public interest were erected along this well-planned axis. Many of them still exist: Bethune College, the Scottish Church College, a public swimming pool and club at Hedua (Azad Hind Bag), the Brahmo Samaj Mandir, the Hatibagan Market, the Star and other theatres, the College Street Market, Presidency College, Hare School, Sanskrit College, Hindu School, Calcutta University, the University Institute, the Calcutta Medical College, the Muslim Institute, and the Survey of India Office (earlier the Calcutta Meteorological Office).

This axial route was planned to relieve the traditional north-south route along Chitpur Road, the old pilgrim's path to Kalighat Temple in the south. While Chitpur Road was flanked by temples and rich men's palaces and mansions, the new axis was chiefly adorned with planned public places embodying the new ethos of the city during the nineteenth-century 'Renaissance' in Calcutta and Bengal.

Thus the opening of a new planned axis by a judicious process of town planning generated new activity patterns, in response to the social needs of the time, which found expression in commensurate land use under public and semi-public aegis. It opened up the 'native town' and provided old Calcutta with its only important mass transportation corridor.

The axial road also adapted European town-planning practice to Indian conditions. For example, ever since the Renaissance, European town planning had incorporated squares which were essentially public parks, sometimes with monuments and pavements. In Calcutta, these squares were accommodated with tanks, admirably suited to the demands of local climate, hygiene and recreation. The model was probably set at the beginning of the settlement by the formation of Tank Square or



Lal Dighi (now Binay-Badal-Dinesh Bag) in the centre of the original European town, and even today the hub of the city's commerce and administration. 19.2 A 'tank square' in the former European town

During the same period, the Committee built Hastings Street (Kiran Shankar Ray Road) and Loudon Street (Dr U.N. Brahmachari Road), and opened up and widened Free School Street (Mirza Ghalib Street), Kyd Street (Dr Muhammad Ishaque Street), Mangoe Lane, Bentinck Street and Creek Row, the last by filling up an old creek flowing eastward.

The Lottery Committee was killed off in 1836 by a recoil of British public opinion against this system of fund raising. Its place was taken by the Fever Hospital Committee, appointed the same year by Lord Auckland.

The Fever Hospital and Municipal Improvements Committee

This famous Committee marked a watershed in the municipal history of Calcutta. Its appointment was primarily due to the enlightened zeal and dedication of Sir James Ronald Martin, Surgeon of the Native Hospital in Dharmatala. His note on the medical topography of Calcutta and its suburbs, chiefly with reference to local health conditions, recommended the establishment of a fever hospital and proper sanitation for the town. He was successful in attracting Government support: Lord Auckland gave official status to the Committee, which was appointed at a public meeting in the Town Hall. Sir John Peter Grant, Puisne Judge of the Supreme Court in Calcutta from 1833 to 1848, was appointed Chairman.

The Committee identified the defective drainage of the town as the major source of its dreaded diseases. While it argued for a great central hospital and additional dispensaries, it also called in engineers to refute the view that Calcutta, by virtue of its location and climate, was beyond the aid of sanitary science, and discussed various schemes for its proper drainage. It also dealt with town planning in general and advocated the construction of more thoroughfares and the excavation of large tanks or reservoirs to augment the water supply. It explored the critical problem of conservancy in the town. Finally, its monumental report – issued at last in 1847 – also dealt at length with the prospect of municipal government for Calcutta and its financial implications.

The immediate outcome of the Committee's report was the formation, under Act XVI of 1847, of a Board of seven Commissioners, of whom four were to be elected representatives of the rate-payers: the earliest attempt at local self-government in Calcutta. The preamble to the Act narrates the various problems of Calcutta identified by the Fever Hospital Committee: sewerage, drainage, water supply, conservancy, provision of open spaces, repairs to roads, street lighting, provision of broad thoroughfares, prevention of nuisance, and medical relief for the poor. Subsequent experiments with local self-government continued through various Acts of 1852, 1854, 1856, 1863, 1870, 1876, 1888 and 1899.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the municipal government was preoccupied with primary infrastructural improvements to the city, especially the provision of a water supply system and a system of drainage and sewerage. These have been treated in other articles. Unfortunately, the authorities did not as yet grasp the imperative need of developing the city according to an overall plan – a lack which had disastrous results for the future. The meagre resources of the municipality were severely strained by the costly drainage and water supply schemes. As a result, one of the most comprehensive schemes for street improvement, made by Lieutenant Abercrombie, Superintendent of Roads and Conservancy, at the specific request of the Fever Hospital and Municipal Improvements Committee, remained largely unaccomplished and was finally abandoned in 1888-89. Beadon Street (now Dani Ghosh Sarani), with Beadon Square or

Rabindra Kanan, in 1868; Grey Street (Arabinda Sarani) in 1873; and Upper Strand Road were the much belated and partial realization of Lieutenant Abercrombie's grand town-planning schemes comprising seven major proposals of arterial connections and extensions for the overall improvement of the street system.

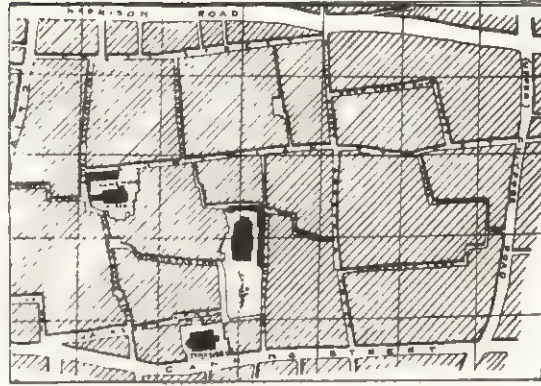
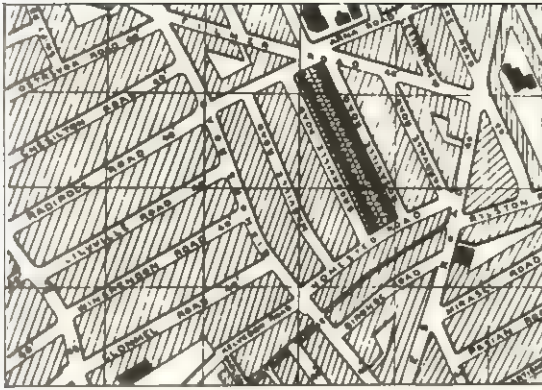
Canning Street (Biplabi Rasbihari Basu Road) was also built during this period, in 1863; and between 1889 and 1892, the important eighty-foot-wide Harrison Road (now Mahatma Gandhi Road). After 1888, a new Act made it obligatory for the Corporation to spend a fixed amount on suburban improvements. Some fine roads came to be laid out in what were then the suburbs. Among them were Lansdowne (now Sharat Basu) Road, Harish Mukherji Road, Hazra Road, Chetla Central Road, Judges' Court Road and Woodburn Park Road.

The fact remains that, in the words of S.W. Goode in *Municipal Calcutta* (1916), 'Sporadic improvements were made, but the disjointed, irregular pattern which the growing town had taken on was not undone and re-woven according to a plan.' But this is not to deny that many vital improvements were carried out during this period by the municipal government through its own initiative and resources. This was largely possible owing to suitable legislative support. While the Acts of 1856, 1863 and 1876 contained provisions for improving the line of streets by setting buildings forward or back, the Act of 1888 empowered the Commissioners to prepare and publish the alignment of projected streets, to which all building and rebuilding had to conform. Thus the nineteenth century ended with some great achievements of the municipal government in the field of urban development, particularly infrastructural development, and some rudimentary planning principles partially embodied in practice with suitable legislative provisions.

The Earlier Twentieth Century

In 1902-03 some large but isolated road development schemes were suspended by the Government, in view of the decision to form a Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) with large revenues of its own to carry out a comprehensive programme of city development and street improvements, to reclaim insanitary and con-





19.3 & 19.4 A comparison of the street mesh in London (left) and Calcutta (right)

gested areas, and to provide for the rehousing of the displaced population. Unfortunately, the Trust was not actually formed until 1912 – with the transfer of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Nevertheless, the Trust truly initiated the era of planned development for the city of Calcutta.

The enactment of the Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911, coming into force on 2 January 1912, was largely in response to the critical situation revealed by a medical enquiry into the condition of Calcutta in 1896 owing to the outbreak of plague, and the report of the Building Commission appointed in April 1897 to consider changes in the law relating to buildings and streets in Calcutta. The experience gained through the Bombay Improvement Act of 1898 also provided impetus for similar legislation for Calcutta. The object was to provide for the improvement and expansion of Calcutta in an orderly manner by constituting a Board of Trustees empowered to undertake schemes relating to health, 'defective ventilation', communications, conservancy and the provision of building sites.

At the very start, the order of the Trust's operations was carefully spelt out by its first Chairman, Cecil Henry Bompas: to examine the need and scope for construction of roads; to develop suburban areas; to carry out rehousing schemes for the working classes; to prepare schemes for widening the approaches to Calcutta; and to acquire open spaces for parks in the suburban municipalities. These priorities remain valid in today's context, especially in the sprawling urban fringe areas.

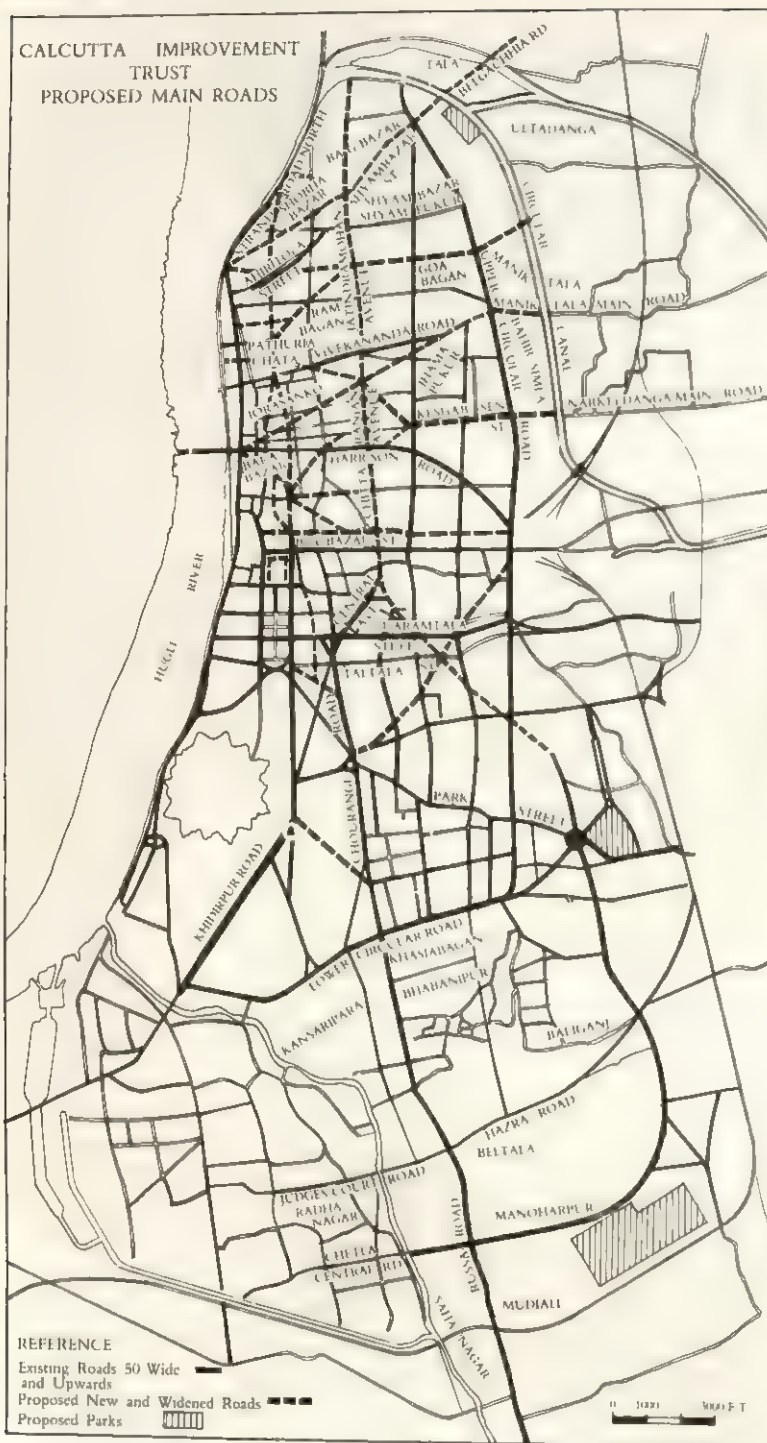
E.P. Richards, previously Engineer of the Madras Corporation, joined the CIT as Chief Engineer in September 1912 and was directed 'to prepare a scheme of main roads of primary importance to Calcutta and suburbs'. It was

realized that no single main road could be built 'without considering how it would link up with other roads, at present existing or likely to be constructed in future', and more generally, that the entire question of traffic and transport in Calcutta and its suburbs was a single integrated problem requiring a single mind.

Although Richards's stay with the CIT was brief owing to the failure of his health, he produced the first planning document on Calcutta, written partly in Calcutta and partly in London between January 1913 and March 1914, and published from England in 1914 under the title 'Report on the Condition, Improvement and Town Planning of the City of Calcutta and Contiguous Areas'. This report is a historic landmark in the planned development of Calcutta, having drawn benefits from the European thought concerning town planning emerging in the early twentieth century.

These principles recognized the integral importance of the suburbs and indeed the entire region outside the municipal limits of the city in question. Richards identified the weakness of the CIT in this respect, as it was not created under a Town Planning Act: indeed, the Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911 was based almost word for word on Part I of the English Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890. Therefore, Richards drafted in his report a Town Planning Act as supplementary to the Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911, which would be sufficient to deal comprehensively with the suburbs and contiguous areas as well as the inner city. He then proceeded to lay out the best that could be done under the 1911 Act – i.e., schemes limited to the 'urban Calcutta' of the time, generally bounded by the Circular Road (today's Acharya J.C. Basu Road and Acharya Praphullachandra Road).

The proposals were prefaced by a careful



19.5 Map of Calcutta showing the development projected by the CIT. (This does not correspond to the subsequent growth of the city)

comparison of Calcutta with other major cities of the world. The findings were revealing:

Calcutta. ... possesses an abnormally low proportion of real roads and streets per square mile. Instead of being served by main roads, the city is served by streets, used as main roads; and instead of the property masses being each served by their own lot of streets, they are provided only with highly irregular lanes and passages that have to serve as

streets. If Constantinople, also Cairo and some of the Chinese cities be excluded it would be found, I think, that Calcutta contains a greater mileage of lanes and passages per square mile, than any other city in the world.

A detailed examination brought out the following striking defects and deficiencies

1. The maximum density of building and population concurred with the least provision of roads and streets.
2. In the rectangular system of main roads, the meshes were many times larger than those of any other city: i.e., the main roads were fewer and far more widely separated than is normal.
3. These roads were of very unequal width and traffic capacity, which moreover bore no relation to their position. The 'miserably narrow' Chitpur Road carried a heavier traffic than the 60-to-70-ft. wide Cornwallis Street and the 80-to-100-ft. Circular Road.
4. There was a great lack of diagonal roads, the only two such properly speaking being Harrison Road and Park Street.
5. There was scarcely a single truly direct radial route in or out of the city centre. Such routes as did exist were haphazard and illogical. For example the 100-ft.-wide Clive Street (now Netaji Subhash Road) branched into a 20-ft-wide street and another 50 to 60 feet wide but ending abruptly. The Chourangi route also ended blindly at 'a church and the impenetrable slum'. The only true radial route, down Lalbazar and Boubazar (now B.B. Ganguli) Streets, was therefore overcrowded.
6. The parallel main roads running north and south decreased in width, traffic capacity and proximity to each other as they came closer to the riverside instead of the other way about. This was a grave defect in a riverine port.
7. The Strand Road itself was abnormally narrow and died out suddenly to the north. Also, it lacked the roads which should normally have run eastward, connecting it to the interior.
8. Detached fragments of main road existed haphazardly, like Amherst Street (now Raja Rammohan Sarani) and Halliday Street (at the site of the present Muhammad Ali Park).

9. Between the dozen main roads, 'thrown down criss-cross and far apart, as it might be done by a child from a handful of sticks', Calcutta was in a state of 'awful streetlessness'. Virtually nowhere in Calcutta was there the normal mesh of streets allowing transit within the blocks formed by the main roads. 2,500 acres were provided only with haphazard lanes and passages.
10. The inlets and outlets to the north, and still more the inadequate ones to the east and north-east, were constricted by badly outdated bridges and approaches, creating bottlenecks. The 'new grotesque exit at Scaldah' was cited as an instance.

Richards went on to analyse the situation with respect to slums; parks and open spaces; water supply and drainage; housing and residential conditions; and the distribution and movement of population within the city. On this basis, he enumerated a number of improvements required to raise Calcutta to a moderate level of urban amenities:

1. About 21 miles of new wide main roads and 8 miles of widening of existing roads.
2. About 110 miles of ordinary 30- and 40-foot streets, which would at least bring Calcutta in line with the old built-up sections of European cities.
3. Removal or improvement of 800 acres of slums.
4. Re-planning and development of 6,000 acres of suburbs inside the city boundaries.
5. Similar development, with laying down of sewerage lines, for 2,000 acres in Maniktala (then outside the municipal boundary).
6. Likewise, re-planning of 2,000 acres in the Kashipur-Chitpur area, which would one day become part of Calcutta.
7. A new bridge over the Hugli in place of the existing one; also a second bridge at Ahiritola.
8. Rebuilding, widening or replacement of sixteen defective out-of-date bridges over railways and canals; also new bridges at several points such as Halsibagan.
9. Setting up good squares, parks and playgrounds, especially in North Calcutta. A riverside promenade road was recommended for north Calcutta, which would also be of great use in the event of

increased river shipping and associated traffic. The best system, given enough money and powers, was thought to be one of radial parks entering Calcutta from the south, east and north. Failing that, the existing parks could be improved at trifling cost.

10. Direct encouragement in every possible way to private and public-company housing enterprise.
11. Provision of the normal allowance of tramway routes, of which there was a deficiency of 60 miles in Calcutta and Haora at the time.

The Report concluded by presenting nine alternative schemes, with estimates of cost, for the improvement of intra-city main roads. The ideal lay-out, Scheme I, was confessedly 'very much too expensive'. Scheme II set out the 'Sub-Ideal' and Scheme III the 'Sub-Ideal reduced'. At the end of the list came Scheme IX, the one recommended for adoption – much the same as Scheme III, 'plus certain slight alterations which nevertheless make very distinct improvements'. The projected cost under this last scheme was Rs. 568 lakh or about £3,780,000.

In the next forty years or so, the CIT carried out more than a hundred schemes of road improvement, area development, slum rehousing, parks and playgrounds, and thereby made a heroic effort at improving conditions within the municipal limits as laid down at the time. Although the Trust could not open up any major diagonal road, as suggested by Richards, it extended Park Street, improved Shyambazar Street and created Bhupen Basu Avenue. Its biggest achievement was the construction of a new north-south arterial road, the Central Avenue (now Chittaranjan Avenue and Jatindra Mohan Avenue). It also built Vivekananda Road and B.K. Pal Avenue in north Calcutta and Dr Sundari Mohan Avenue in south-east Calcutta. In the field of new area development, it created Southern Avenue along with the Dhakuria Lakes (Rabindra Sarobar) and East Calcutta along with the Beliaghata Lake (Subhash Sarobar), adding a new dimension to planning and development in Calcutta. No less important was the Area Improvement Programme in Bhabanipur, by which an old residential suburb was upgraded to modern standards of town planning.





19.6 Chourangi Square during the construction of Central Avenue

The latest achievement of the CIT is the creation of new civic centres at Ultadanga and Dhakuria. As this indicates, the Trust is still alive and functioning. But by the middle of the twentieth century, new political and economic developments had put its operations completely out of gear and out of finance. Its capacity to carry out viable schemes had grown greatly restricted. It is all the more important to remember how, through the first half of the century, the CIT gave to Calcutta the best fruits of town planning practice in that age.

Metropolitan Planning after Independence

At the start of the twentieth century, Bengal had made a univocal stand against Lord Curzon's plan for the partition of the province, and made the settled fact an unsettled one. But by the irony of history, Bengal had to pay the price for Indian independence by accepting a similar fate just over forty years after Curzon's move. Calcutta had suffered from one strain after another since the transfer of the capital in 1912: the First World War, the Bengal Famine, the Second World War. But the Partition was the

unkindest cut of all. On the one hand, the city was deprived of her resource region on the other side of the new border; on the other hand, millions of refugees poured in from erstwhile East Pakistan. The civic facilities of Calcutta were taxed beyond endurance. All uncommitted vacant land in and around the city became the encampments of millions of homeless men and women. Thus hundreds of 'refugee colonies' sprang up almost overnight all around the city and occupied all the vacant land in the fringe area. Here the refugees built up their very own type of settlement, bearing some reflection of the village set-up of their lost home. Thus, before the CIT could cross its own administrative hurdle – confinement to the municipal limits of the city – the refugees had taken command of the adjoining areas such as Tollyganj and transformed them into a very different environment. These settlements posed a massive challenge to the planning and development of the city in the following decades.

By the 1950s, Calcutta's civic facilities were under severe strain and grossly inadequate in any case. At the same time, Calcutta was beset by cholera epidemics which drew the attention of the World Health Organization. In 1959, the



WHO deputed a consultant team led by Dr Abel Wolman to examine the water supply and environmental sanitation of Calcutta. The team highlighted the urgent need for rehabilitation and improvement of the water supply and environmental sanitation system. As the team also pointed out, the region of endemic cholera in India fell mainly within the state of West Bengal, with its nucleus in Greater Calcutta, and the cholera situation there had great significance not only for India but for the world at large. In this context, the need was felt of addressing development efforts to a much larger area of Greater Calcutta.

Thus, at the instance of the WHO, a planning organization for Greater Calcutta called the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization (CMPO) was created, and in September 1962, an agreement was signed for the preparation of a Master Plan for water supply, sewerage and drainage in the metropolitan area of Calcutta under the executive direction of the WHO, through an engineering consortium appointed for the purpose, and in collaboration with the CMPO.

The creation of the CMPO in 1961 by the West Bengal Government was in response to

the bitter realization that 'Calcutta is a city in crisis', with a chronic deficit in basic utilities such as water supply, sewerage and drainage and in community facilities such as schools, hospitals, parks and recreation spaces. Its transport system was inadequate and overcrowded; there was a vast housing shortage with proliferating shums and squatters' settlements. The crisis had been exacerbated by the lack of any clear development objectives over a longer perspective, covering a time horizon of, say, twenty years. In the CMPO, 'For the first time, the comprehensive technical skills of modern urban planning [were] brought to bear to determine the co-ordinated and systematic actions that [were] necessary both to provide emergency relief in situations of acute urban crisis arising from the inadequacy of services and facilities, and to lay the foundations for the long-term social and economic progress of the city and its immense hinterland.' (CMPO *Basic Development Plan 1966-1986*, p. 3).

The CMPO identified an area of approximately 460 square miles (1191.4 square kilometres) comprising two municipal corporations, 33 municipalities and 37 non-municipal urban areas, the whole constituting a linear

19.7 Chowringhee Square after the construction of Central Avenue

urbanized sprawl (the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration) on both banks of the river Hugli, interspersed however with substantial rural stretches. This total area, now named the Calcutta Metropolitan District (CMD), was taken as the planning base for the development plans about to be prepared. In 1961 the popula-

tion of the CMD was 6.62 million, as against 2.93 million in Calcutta city.

The CMPO first prepared and published its 'Memorandum on Development Plan: CMD 1966-71' in September 1965, matching the plan period to that of the Fourth Five-Year Plan of the Government of India. That short document

The Authorities

Civic services and civic development in Calcutta are entrusted to a number of organizations, whose precise functions and relations are a mystery to most citizens. This brief account may help.

The Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC) is, as elsewhere, the central civic authority and the organ of local self-government, with elected members headed by the Mayor-in-Council. It levies rates, conducts day-to-day municipal services and enforces civic laws. Chronic paucity of funds prevents it from effectively carrying out long-term development work. This has largely become the concern of other bodies named below, all of which are directly established, controlled and funded by the government.

Haora too has a Municipal Corporation, as does Chandannagar. The other urban centres in the Calcutta Metropolitan District have elected municipalities (31 in all) or, in a few cases (Kalyani, Gayeshpur, and most recently Bidhan Nagar) Notified Area Authorities set up by the government. The rural settlements (numbering some 500) within the Metropolitan District are under village panchayats.

The Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) is the oldest separate authority for the planned development of Calcutta. Till recently, it was a totally independent body; in 1989, it was formally brought under the CMDA (see below). There is also a Haora Improvement Trust.

The Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization (CMPO) has now been abolished, and its functions assumed by

the CMDA. Formed in 1961, the CMPO was the first of the bodies set up in recent decades for Calcutta's development. As its name indicates, it took over the planning and surveying functions hitherto effectively exercised by the CIT; but it did not have the power or capacity to execute projects.

The Calcutta Metropolitan Water and Sanitation Authority (CMWSA), set up in 1966, was also brought under the CMDA in 1974. Its title is self-explanatory.

The Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA), proposed in 1970 and set up in 1971, has become the great 'umbrella' organization for survey, planning and development work throughout the Calcutta Metropolitan District. Its original and still crucial purpose was to execute development projects involving capital outlay. Once completed, however, such projects are usually made over to the CMC or other local civic body for running and maintenance.

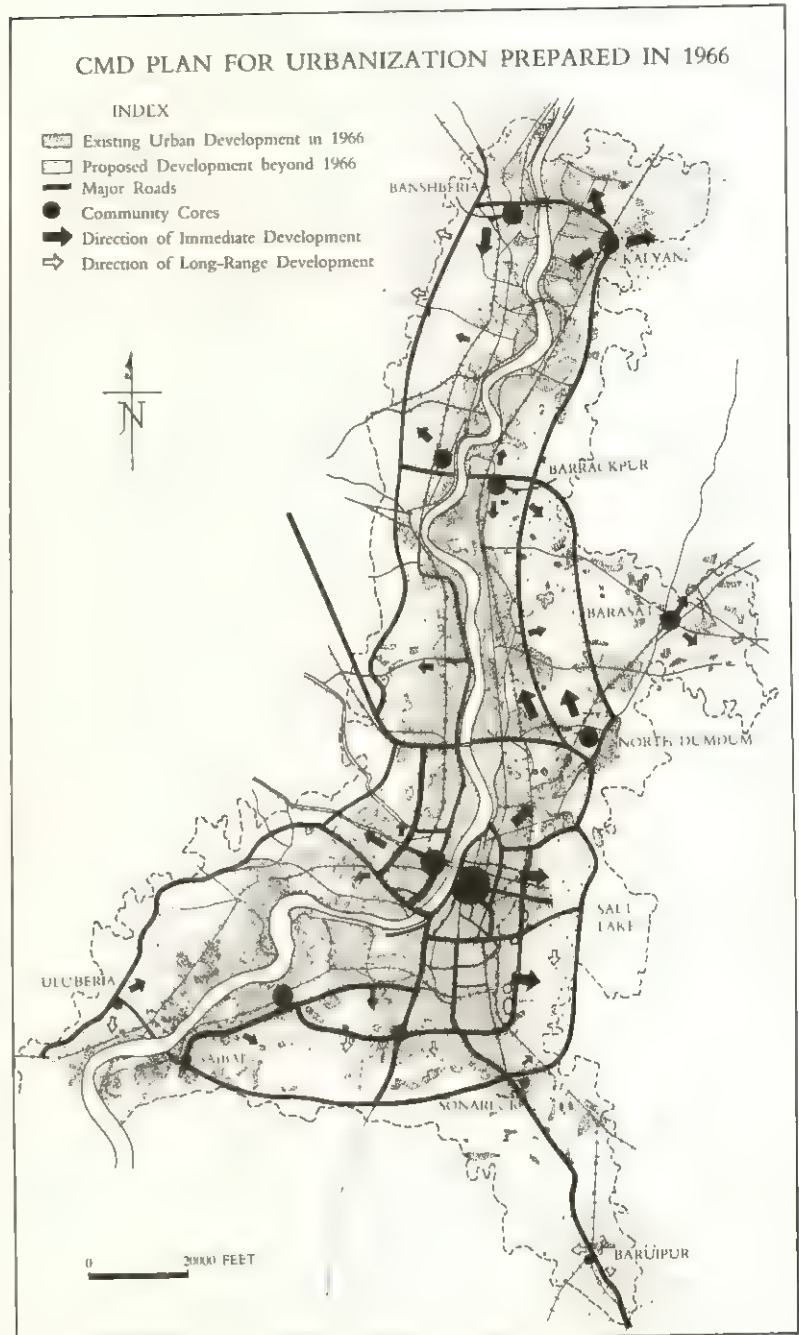
As explained above, executive and statutory bodies like the CIT, CMPO and CMWSA have been brought under or merged in the CMDA. The two chief authorities now looking after any part of the city are therefore the CMDA and the CMC or other local municipal body.

It should also be remembered that in the case of the CIT, the 'Calcutta' in its name refers roughly to the old limits of the Calcutta Corporation - i.e., to a restricted area of 'inner' or 'proper' Calcutta. The CMDA, CMPO and CMWSA, however, have or had jurisdiction over the entire Metropolitan District.

was in fact the first statement of comprehensive planning for Calcutta, embracing the entire metropolitan district, and presented for the first time the seminal 'CMD Plan for Urbanization' indicating the future growth of human settlements and proposed major arterial road alignments. This immensely significant document provided the earliest physical plan frame for so-called 'Greater Calcutta' or the Metropolitan Area. The estimated cost was Rs 100 crores distributed over various sectors: Public Health and Sanitation (Rs 29.30 crores), Traffic and Transportation (Rs 47.17 crores), Slums, Housing and Urban Renewal (Rs 19.62 crores), and Urban Community Development, Parks and Recreation, and others (Rs 3.91 crores.).

In preparing the Plan, the CMPO was richly assisted by international experts through the Ford Foundation Planning Advisory Group, Calcutta, under a liberal grant from the US Ford Foundation. The plan frame was indeed the handiwork of Mr Allan B. Jacobs, a Ford Foundation consultant, who was with the CMPO during 1964-65. In July 1965 he prepared the first draft of 'A Comprehensive Plan for the Calcutta Metropolitan District', along with a detailed physical plan frame named 'CMD: Urban Structure Development Strategy to 1976'. This gave detailed proposals for the demarcation of the use of land for residential, commercial, industrial and recreational use and community facilities within the entire CMD, and also the density level to which each residential block should be developed. In short, it was a Master Plan with a prescription for orderly growth and development of the CMD. It may even be regarded as the highwater mark of urban planning in Calcutta. Unfortunately, it was never adapted in its full form.

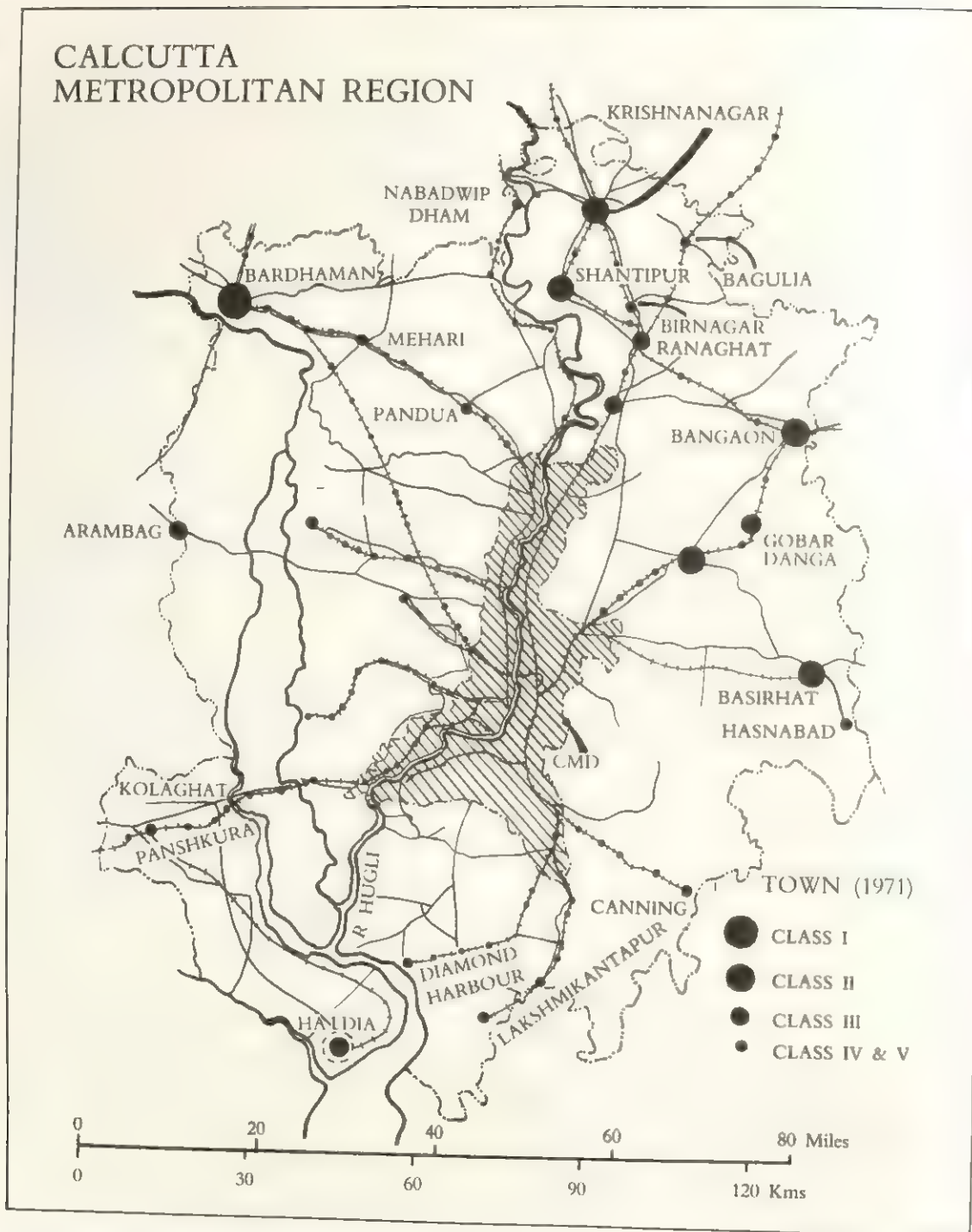
Instead, on 25 December 1966, the CMPO published the 'Basic Development Plan for the Calcutta Metropolitan District 1966-1986' (BDP) with an altogether different development strategy and a much diluted physical plan. The 1965 Memorandum had envisaged a coherent, consistent and balanced urban structure, taking full cognizance of historical developments along both banks of the river Hugli. The BDP, on the contrary, proposed a loosely-defined 'Two-Centre' development strategy around the Metropolitan Centre (comprising the existing industrial, commercial and service core in Calcutta and Haora plus the areas at their fringes) and the Kalyani-Banshberia centre



some forty kilometres to the north. Based on the above strategy, the BDP proposed a map containing 'Existing and Recommended Land Use in the Metropolitan District' (Map 22 of the BDP) which was not sufficiently indicative of future growth; it was also less attentive to the stem of the metropolitan structure stretching between Baranagar and Naihati on the eastern bank of the river. Further, in the absence of adequate statutory and political support, the BDP remained essentially a policy document

19.8 Map showing the CMDA Plan for Urbanization, 1966

19.9 The Calcutta Metropolitan Region



with a general commentary on the metropolitan and regional context of development.

We may therefore justifiably say that the 1960s was both an exhilarating and a frustrating period in the planning history of Calcutta. Never before in any metropolitan city in India had such a comprehensive planning exercise been undertaken, with experts drawn from all over the world. It provided an emerging band

of young professionals with an opportunity to gain initiation into the total process of urban planning, hitherto little known in India. But despite so much thought, study and honest endeavour, no general commitment to the planning process could be achieved: a gap remained between planning and decision-making. An effective plan for Calcutta, which could guide and control all its future growth

and development, was conceived but not brought to fruition.

In 1971, in the face of continuing urban problems as well as social, political and economic disorder in the city, the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) was created for co-ordinating planning and development activities within the CMD. The CMDA has emerged as the most powerful apex body for urban planning and development in the Calcutta region, guiding and largely financing the asset development of the other bodies, though recently much responsibility for finance and development has been transferred to the municipalities.

In 1970-71, the present author, who was then with the CMPO, published a proposal for a multi-nucleated metropolitan structure as opposed to the 'Two-Centre' strategy. Drawing an analogy between an urban structure and a living organism, it was assumed that each urban community (generally identified through one or two municipalities) grouped round a strong community centre (having most of the facilities of city centres, comprising administrative, commercial, recreational and cultural activities for the surrounding community) resembled an organic cell with a nucleus at the core. The total conglomerate could thus be termed a 'Multi-Cellular Metropolitan Organism'.

Such a concept provided the basis for the strategy adopted in the CMDA's 'Development Perspective Plan', prepared in 1976. Subsequently the CMDA made another attempt in its 'Perspective Plan and Action Programme for the CMD', issued in 1981, to elaborate the basic concept of multi-centre development into a hierarchy of centres. But this too remains largely unfulfilled.

Despite repeated exercises in planning and many local and partial successes, no comprehensive plan frame for Calcutta has been successfully implemented so far. In the last analysis, Calcutta remains one of the least planned cities of the world. There could be no better way of celebrating the city's tercentenary than by presenting her with a plan fit for the future and ensuring its execution.

Such a plan would need to address itself to a much larger context than even the CMD. As I have suggested elsewhere, a regional planning approach should be adopted. Map 19.9 depicts the future Calcutta Metropolitan Region which should be the logical planning base for Calcutta in the coming century.

Such a vast metropolitan tract would be the natural culmination of growth for a settlement that began with three villages three hundred years ago.

CMDA

TRAFFIC AND TRANSPORT IN CALCUTTA

Sukanta Chaudhuri

Obviously, a city's traffic and transport situation has two chief aspects: the state of the roads and traffic control arrangements, and the provision of vehicles for public transport. Let us take up these two areas one by one with respect to Calcutta.

As every Calcuttan knows, only 6.5% per cent of the city's area is occupied by roads. (Bombay has 16 per cent, Delhi a generous 23 per cent). The focus of congestion, as in any old city, is the central business district (CBD). From Binay-Badal-Dinesh Bag (formerly Dalhousie Square), offices stretch without a break southwards through Chourangi up to Acharya J.C. Basu Road (Lower Circular Road). To the north, they abut upon the immense chaotic sprawl of Barabazar, whose intricate traffic flows defy control. And Barabazar is precisely where the Haora Bridge draws nearly all the passenger traffic, and much of the goods traffic, heading towards the rest of India.

The major lines of traffic flow in Calcutta have always been towards this area – i.e., north or south to centre, to some extent veering from east to west. Even the broad roads leading from the south can barely absorb the rush-hour traffic, and the approaches from the north have always been inadequate. But now, the problem is compounded by increasingly important lines of north-to-south traffic which can avoid the city centre only by striking out farther and

farther towards the east. Nazrul Islam Sarani (VIP Road) has recently been augmented by the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass to provide the latest such corridor. The older corridor along Acharya Praphullachandra Road and Acharya J. C. Basu Road (Upper and Lower Circular Road) has been strengthened by the building of a flyover at Shealdah. But much north-to-south traffic still passes through the Central Business District.

A different class of problems exists at the far-flung corners of the Calcutta Metropolitan District (CMD), whose population has multiplied staggeringly since Partition. The brunt of the commuter traffic is borne by the suburban trains. But trunk roads through the CMD take the goods traffic to and from the Port and the core city; road passenger traffic is also rising, both among local passengers within the suburbs, and from the districts and remoter suburbs to the city. (A flourishing express bus network has grown up in the last two decades). Yet the only trunk roads of even moderate capacity are the Barrackpur Trunk Road and Jessore Road from the north and Diamond Harbour Road from the south.

Another set of problems arises from the fact that Calcutta is cut off by the River Hugli from most of India: long-distance traffic must cross the river. Besides the Haora Bridge, there is only the Vivekananda Bridge at Bali, still more crucial for goods traffic. The next road bridge is





at Kalyani, and the next beyond that at Baharampur, about 180 kilometres away.

The Haora Bridge replaces a pontoon bridge built in 1874. The present one, 1,500 feet long, is the world's third longest cantilever bridge and by far the most heavily used. A 1964 survey clocked some 53,000 vehicles and 5,00,000 passengers on an average weekday; this is expected to reach 85,000 vehicles by the end of the century. The approach roads are woefully inadequate, despite building a flyover at the Calcutta end and an ingenious traffic dispersal system at the Haora end.

Calcutta has other traffic problems unique in degree if not in kind. There is a range of slow traffic: handcarts, rickshaws (including that depressing survival, the hand-drawn rickshaw), animal-drawn vehicles. There are 6,000 licensed rickshaws and 12,000 licensed handcarts; but unlicensed vehicles number at least twice that. They cannot be wished away. They provide employment; they reduce transport costs on many commodities; and sometimes (as during floods, or on very narrow lanes) there's simply no substitute.

There is acute shortage of parking space in Calcutta: cars are habitually parked on the streets. Again, Calcutta is uniquely receptive towards small tradesmen on its pavements and indeed on the carriageway itself. There are said to be some 60,000 street hawkers. Their stalls tend to cluster at road junctions, which should

be kept clear most of all: hence in Calcutta, intersection delays make up 82 per cent of all traffic delays – far above the world average. Average travel speed in the city is 6 km per hour. (An acceptable average would be 15 km.)

Pedestrian traffic provides the final burden. In the peak office rush, some tens of thousands of commuters walk between Haora and Shealdah and the CBD. The flyover at Shealdah does not separate lines of vehicular traffic, but only the pedestrians from the vehicles. There is also, of course, a special class of privileged pedestrian: the political procession or rally, that can throw the whole city's traffic out of gear for a day.

Common sense and ocular evidence suggest what official surveys confirm, that Calcuttans must curb their go-as-you-like spirit if they wish to move about within their city. A 1966 CMPO survey calculated that the then extant roads (further developed since) could be at least 25 per cent better utilized through improved traffic management. A 1976 CMDA report confirmed that 'very little attention has been paid so far to conserving and effectively utilising what little space is available'. The physical and mental pressure on the Calcutta driver may be the heaviest in the world. Congestion and delay induce short-cuts and violation, and professional drivers often use such tactics as their basic *modus operandi*. The beleaguered pedestrian avails of any liberty open to him. In

20.1 Traffic jam below Haora Bridge

Below :
20.2 A rickshaw in a flooded street



this milieu, the policeman's lot is not a happy one. He classically takes refuge in resigned tolerance of the *melée*, and remarkable symbiosis with violators of rules.

Occasional traffic drives produce almost miraculous results. Immense if volatile enthusiasm was generated when in 1988, a Minister of the State Government personally supervised traffic on the roads. New systems are also being tried out: ambitiously, for instance, at the west end of Haora Bridge. The spaghetti junctions approaching the second Hugli bridge will set a new standard in this respect.

Surprisingly, Calcutta has only recently adopted one-way systems in the congested inner city: most successfully on the parallel stretches of Park Street and Shakespeare Sarani, but also (impeded by tram lines running both ways) on Lenin Sarani and S.N. Banerji Road, and most recently on College Street and Raja Rammohan Sarani. But a comprehensive one-way system for central Calcutta, as envisaged in the 1966 CMPO blueprint and still more ambitiously in a 1985 report by the Association of Indian Engineering Industry, remains unrealized. And Calcutta is perhaps the world's only metropolis to be virtually without traffic lights, despite some recent abortive attempts at their reintroduction.

So much can be achieved simply by better traffic control that it should not blind us to the deeper need for large-scale building works and heavy investment. The simplest measure is obviously to widen existing roads. The last twenty years have seen substantial widening of Diamond Harbour Road, Barrackpur Trunk Road, Raja Rammohan Sarani, Sharat Basu Road, Acharya J.C. Basu Road, Deshapran Shasmal Road, Gurusaday Road, Maniktala Main Road and Ultadanga Main Road among others. But obviously, there is limited scope for such widening, especially in central Calcutta where it is most required. It reduces vital pavement space for pedestrians; and in many cases, it involves the near-impossible process of land acquisition. It was arduous even to break down the verandahs of old houses for widening Raja Rammohan Sarani; and its extension to Park Street remains untouched.

Major new lines of dispersal have been created simply by providing new bridges and flyovers (as at Dhakuria, Chetla, Kasba and Ultadanga) or widening existing ones like Deshbandhu Setu at Kalighat and the Zirat Bridge at Alipur. But the crucial new links, of course, are across the river.

By 1990, Calcutta was due to have three more bridges across the river. One of these,

20.3 *Diamond Harbour Road before widening*





connecting Kalyani and Banshberia at the extreme northern end of the CMD, was opened in 1989. More importantly, a major cable-stayed bridge near Prinsep Ghat, south of the present Haora Bridge, has made considerable progress, though bedevilled first by disputes over the design and then by financial constraints and mishaps during construction. The third bridge, in north Calcutta, remains a proposal on paper.

Once the second Hugli Bridge at Prinsep Ghat is complete (conceivably in 1991), traffic from south Calcutta to Haora Station need not pass through the CBD at all. More important still, goods traffic from the port can cross the river in the same way to the proposed truck terminal at Kona in Haora, from where highways and expressways will lead to the all-India trunk roads. This will clear the present trunk route via Barrackpur Trunk Road and Vivekananda Bridge, and eliminate the warehouses and transport depots of Barabazar and Posta Bazar. Then and then only might Calcutta be free of its nodal points of congestion. Another truck terminal has been proposed at Dakshineswar near the Vivekananda Bridge, and most recently a third at Kalyani. An imaginative proposal has also been made to ferry trucks across the river from the port, leaving the bridges free for passenger traffic.

But the Kona Truck Terminal will take time

to materialize, for daunting land acquisition problems are only just being overcome. Transport operators are also stolidly resistant to moving out of Barabazar. Obviously, land acquisition in central Calcutta is still more problematic. Gone are the days when the Calcutta Improvement Trust could lay down broad new roads through congested areas: Central or Chittaranjan Avenue between 1912 and 1934; Vivekananda Road (completed 1928), B.K. Pal Avenue (1937-39), and the numerous 'CIT Roads' in what were once outlying areas like Beliaghata and Tiljala. The whole eastern complex around Kankurgachhi and Phulbagan was created in this manner.

Today such proposals of the CMPO as the Circular Expressway through south-central Calcutta, and its Southern Extension to the Behala region, seem impossible of execution. A link between Tollyganj through Putiari to Behala, and another between Prince Anwar Shah Road and Layalka Maidan, have been delayed by the failure to acquire land, though work is now progressing hearteningly on both. In central Calcutta, the only immediate hope lies in upgrading Strand Bank Road to provide a better outlet for goods traffic until more radical diversions are created.

The other new roads in the near future must all be on the city's periphery. The Eastern

20.4 Diamond Harbour Road after widening





Metropolitan Bypass is complete, though not to its final width, and the feeder roads are being built one by one. Also in hand, desultorily, is the Belgharia Expressway between Vivekananda Bridge and Dumdum, to provide a crucial channel for trans-river goods traffic. I have already spoken of the nascent stage of the highways planned across the river in Hoara.

The ultimate diversion, of course, is to create totally new transit systems. The first and greatest of these of these is in partial operation, due to be complete by 1991: the Metro Rail from Tollyganj to Dumdum, treated in a separate article. But Calcuttans have not had time yet to ponder on the disturbing uncertainty of the second planned Metro line, across the river from Haora through the CBD to Shealdah Station and Salt Lake. This would free the commuter of the trials of Haora Bridge and Barabazar, link the two main railway stations, and benefit the growing settlements to the north-east of the city. (There are also proposals for Metro lines to Dakshineswar in the north and Garia and Joka in the south.) Attractive offers of assistance – from Japan, for instance – have been kept on ice by the Government of India, and impossible demands of local contributions laid down, even while an ambitious Metro system at vast cost is being planned for Delhi.

Humbler but equally imperative is the Circular Railway, as yet in embryonic form. Three-quarters of inner Calcutta is ringed by railway lines; but through passenger services from north to south, skirting Shealdah Station, were started only recently. More significantly, a tenuous link has been set up between the northern section and the CBD. There is little traffic on either stretch, owing to paucity of trains in the first case and, incredibly, a lack of passengers in the second, as land acquisition problems have delayed the crucial connection with the chief northern lines at Dumdum (which will also provide an interchange with the Metro). The land has now been obtained. Once the link is set up and the new track electrified, suburban trains can run straight through to the CBD. It is then proposed to extend the line southward through Khidirpur and Garden Reach to join the existing Bajbaj line in the south-west, completing the circle.

Two limiting factors must be recognized. Firstly, for considerable stretches, the Circular

Railway will share the same track with the existing suburban lines, which are already taxed to capacity. Secondly, it will function as a conduit for suburban commuters to the inner city, rather than a true ring railway for dwellers of the city proper. Nonetheless, its immense benefits should not be overshadowed by those of the more spectacular Metro.

A notably successful – and profitable – scheme has been to reintroduce Calcutta's earliest form of public transport: by water. A co-operative, the Hugli Nadi Jalapath Paribahan Samabay Samiti, runs efficient ferry services between Haora Station and the CBD, bypassing Haora Bridge, and provides swifter and more restful access from congested north-west Calcutta to the landing points along the CBD. (The riverside location of the CBD is an advantage here.) Some 160,000 passengers used the launches in 1988. The target for 1991 is 500,000, and there are plans for a State-owned Water Transport Corporation.

Let us turn from the river to land transport. The accompanying Table gives the recent break-up of types of vehicles and passenger loads. The

TABLE 1 Number of Registered Vehicles in Calcutta

	1977	1987
<i>Fast vehicles:</i>		
Goods trucks	23,465	31,630
Cars and jeeps	81,468	1,62,388
Motorcycles and scooters	35,702	1,51,323
Taxis	6,956	15,630
Contract carriages	1,950	6,402
Buses	3,239	5,404
Minibuses	310	904
Authorickshaws	0	1,865
Delivery vans	N.A.	12,362
Others	3,079	9,634
	1,56,169	3,97,542
<i>Slow vehicles:</i>		
Rickshaws: licensed	5,986	5,988
unlicensed (estimate)	12,000	12,000
Handcarts: licensed	11,417	12,111
unlicensed (estimate)	23,000	24,000
Pushvans	1,925	2,398
Hackney carriages	55	33
Grand total:	2,10,552	4,54,072

The table above gives figures for vehicles registered in Calcutta alone. About 40,000 fast vehicles enter the city from the districts and other states every day. The number of Calcutta registrations increases by 30,000 to 40,000 every year.

ratio of public transport vehicles to passengers is alarming by any standards: one vehicle for every 1,600 passengers. 43 lakh travel per day on a system built for 24 lakh. In what we may call the 'crush hour', a tram carries about 200 people in its two carriages, and a single-decker bus up to 100. In 1966, the *average* load per bus was estimated at 85 passengers.

Such pressure leads to an inevitable devaluation of the more expensive and supposedly more exclusive modes of transport. The mini-buses and 'Special' buses, with fares from 60 to 300 per cent over the ordinary, have long abandoned their original promise of a seat for every passenger. Auto-rickshaws confine themselves to an overloaded (and illegal) shuttle service between set points, where other cities have motorcycle-taxis or battery buses. Taxis are often similarly abused. Calcutta's taxi service is a perennial grievance to Calcuttans and visitors alike, low availability and poor comfort being compounded by a brazenly high refusal rate.

The Calcutta Tramways Company was set up in 1879. Through the days of horse-drawn, steam-powered and electric vehicles, it held a monopoly retained after take-over by the State Government in 1967 and full acquisition in 1976. Calcutta's buses, on the contrary, were

originally under private owners. It was only in 1948 that the Calcutta State Transport Corporation was set up with a fleet of twenty-five buses. In 1988-89 it had 1,266, plying on some eighty routes, as well as a network of long-distance services. It is claimed that 800-850 of its vehicles take the roads daily, up from 650 in 1985-86. The 'outshedding' of trams, on the contrary, declined from 409 in 1966 to 260 in 1986, and has slowly climbed to 290 since then.

But the CSTC was set up to provide employment (especially, at first, among East Bengal refugees) as much as transport. It is chronically overstaffed, with an effective staff-to-bus ratio of 14.5 to 1 in 1988-9 (but much higher even shortly before). This, and its generous personnel policies, place it at a constant disadvantage against the aggressively pragmatic practices of the private bus system.

By 1966, nearly all the bus routes in inner Calcutta had been brought under the CSTC, which even showed a modest profit – at the cost of untold hardship for commuters. By a change of policy, new private bus routes were opened in 1967, and have increased ever since. Today some 3,000 buses plying in Calcutta are privately owned, as are the 900-odd mini-buses.

Private buses follow iron rules in their *modus operandi*, but this is commonly to the detriment

20.5 Ferry ghat on the Hugli



of passengers' interests and traffic discipline. The CSTC has introduced new standards of service and courtesy; but these benefits are offset by the relative paucity of its services, owing to very low utilization levels of both vehicles and man-power. Hence, both the CSTC and the CTC are in chronic financial straits.

Upto 1986-87, the CSTC had incurred a total loss of Rs 187.99 crore and the CTC Rs 48.25 crore. The latter is now the bigger liability of the two. (We must remember, however, that the Delhi Transport Corporation had a deficit of Rs 176.92 crore in 1985-86 projected to rise to Rs 200 crore in 1988-89).

Even the present level of service has only been maintained through massive help under the Calcutta Urban Transport Project (CUTP) of the World Bank. This money has bought 530 new buses and 75 trams, and renovated another 200 buses and 170 trams, in addition to traffic

engineering works, creation of terminals etc. The total amount spent was Rs 102 crore. Another Rs 60 crore will be available between 1989 and 1992.

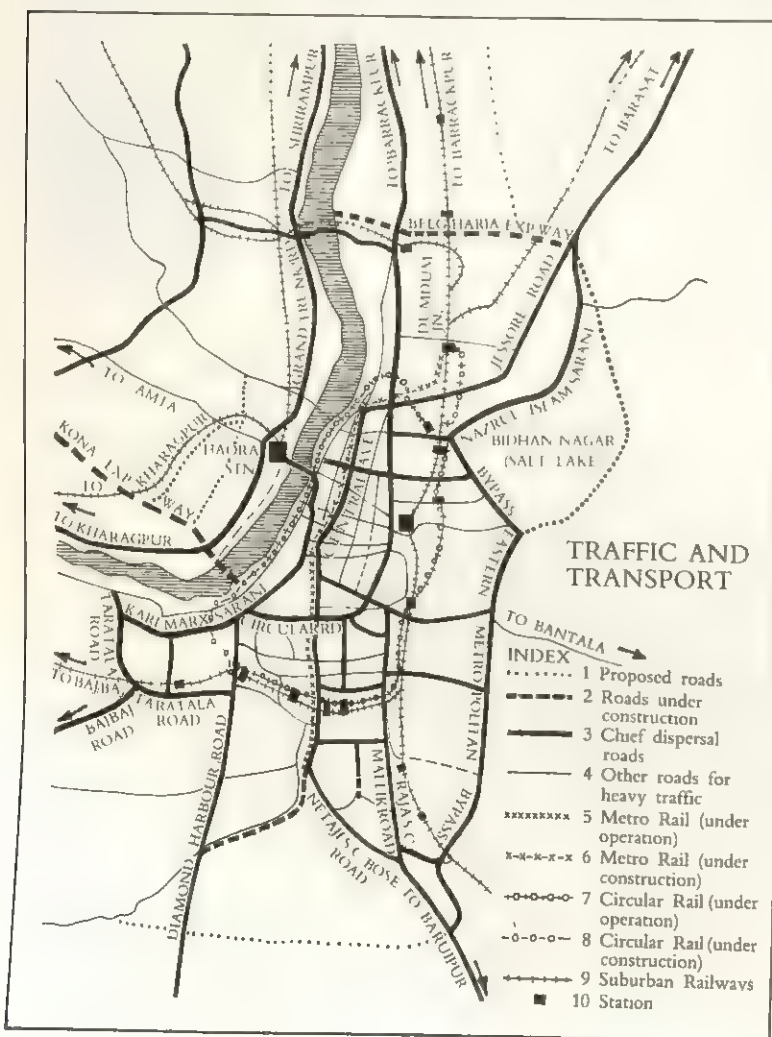
The CSTC and CTC are also making some attempts at internal economies and better operational control. For the first time in decades, new tram lines have been laid: from Maniktala to Ultadanga in 1985, and Behala to Joka in 1986. New route patterns have been introduced. This happily reverses the earlier policy, overreliant on British precedent, of phasing out tram services (as in the defunct Haora and Nimtala sections). Though the policy on further expansion of the tramways is uncertain, it is at least now a valid possibility – wherever possible on reserved tracks that do not interfere with other traffic. The Planning Commission has also recommended the retention of trams: cheap to operate, pollution-free, with an hourly carrying capacity nearly 1.5 times that of bus services.

In a word, there is room for mild and cautious optimism about inner-city transport, though the tangible improvement is scarcely perceptible as yet. A greater challenge is posed by the suburban train services, which carry 6 lakh passengers daily to Haora and 10 lakh to Shealdah. (Needless to say, these counts do not include ticketless travellers.) There are 43 crore originating passengers every year from these two stations, plus a substantial traffic between the rest of the suburban network.

Nowhere perhaps are the devastating pressures of Partition, and the disquieting 'primate' status of Calcutta, more readily visible than in the suburban train system. From 1946 to the mid-1970s, 4.2 million people entered West Bengal as officially registered refugees alone. The major part settled around Calcutta, chiefly east of the river and in the relatively empty stretches to the south of the city. Such commuter traffic as previously existed was chiefly on the west bank line from Haora. This increased manifold, but the truly unstemmable increase was in the Shealdah section on the east bank. The main line (the old trunk route to Dhaka) could scarcely cope; still less the single-track line to Bangaon (originally to Jessore) and the sleepy lines of the southern section.

Major developments have taken place, the most important being the electrification of virtually the entire network between 1958 and 1968. (Important exceptions are the neglected

20.6 Map of the
Calcutta traffic network



Bandel-Katwa and Barasat-Hasanabad lines.) Besides, the Bangaon line has been double-tracked up to Barasat, and extra lines of track laid on the Shealdah Main section. Across the river, a 'third line' has been added up to Bandel on the Main Line and Chandanpur on the Haora-Bardhaman Chord.

Among the omissions, the most prominent are the incomplete Haora-Amta and Haora-Sheakhala lines promised many years ago to replace the closed narrow-gauge service run by Martin, Burn and Co. A short stretch, from Haora to Bargachhia, was opened some time back; since then the project has been put in limbo. And little or nothing has been done so far to separate suburban, long-distance and goods tracks and terminals, as in Bombay.

The number of trains has, of course, increased staggeringly. Over 260 ply daily in each direction on the Shealdah Division, and over 140 on the Haora Division of the Eastern

Railway. The South-Eastern Railway has another 60 or so in each direction to and from Haora. Incredibly, each new time-table squeezes in a few more trips. The track, points and signalling system are being grossly over-taxed as a result. Power supply is notoriously unstable, and the coaches, especially in the Shealdah Division, in an appalling state of disrepair. Delays are endemic, and cancellations all too common. Every day, over one and a half million men and women fight the dehumanizing pressures of this system that brings them to the city to work, study and live.

Their defence lies in a sullen resignation that breaks out every so often into obstruction and sometimes open violence. But in the last analysis, the suburban railways are the victim of social pressures about which the railway authorities can do little or nothing. The most basic cause is the unhealthy 'primacy' of Calcutta, to which people must come from dis-



Calcutta Airport

Once upon a time, Calcutta had the busiest airport in the east. The world's first commercial flight, from Amsterdam to Batavia, touched down at Dumdum on 25th June 1927, on a green field used by private aviators. The first runway was laid down in 1930. In those days, KLM flights to Indonesia and Air France flights to Indo-China would touch down at Calcutta, while Imperial Airways ran a service to Delhi.

Today, operations at Calcutta Airport are only a fraction of that at Bombay or Delhi, especially as regards international flights. No airline, not even Air India, flies direct from Calcutta to West Europe or America. Eastbound flights are increasing at a modest pace. Domestic operations are substantial, but chiefly because Calcutta serves as the air link with the North-East, where the terrain makes road and rail transport difficult.

The decline of Dumdum is partly due to the economic and political turmoil of

the 1960s; partly to modern long-haul flight technology which eliminates re-fuelling halts. But in good measure, it is due to Air India, the national carrier, having its base at Bombay, with some devoir to Delhi as the capital. Federal attempts to keep out other airlines from Calcutta have also been alleged in the past. Hence the Calcutta traveller wishing to fly west must change planes at Bombay or Delhi – swelling the count of international travellers from those cities rather than Calcutta. Even so, Calcutta has registered the steepest increase in international passengers in recent years. And flight and landing facilities at Calcutta are judged by pilots to be the best in India.

With the slow upward swing in the state's economy, it is likely that traffic from Calcutta, both domestic and international, will expand. But there seems to be no hope of Dumdum recovering its pre-eminent position in the near future.



20.7 A crowded commuter train

tances often over 100 km as the only place where they can earn a living. The overcrowding is compounded by the economically depressed nature of the region through which the lines pass, the straggling settlements of wave after wave of East Bengal migrants.

The post-Partition generation found in the railways the readiest target for vandalism, and the venue for such practices as ticketless travelling (as much a tacit act of protest as an economic compulsion), or even tampering with traction wires and signals. This has gradually passed into more productive but equally damaging uses of railway property: the trains are moving market-places. We may say that the suburban trains are to greater Calcutta what the pavements are to the inner city. The railways in their turn have grown entrenched in a resigned perpetuation of this working chaos.

The biggest hope at present is for rapid completion of the Circular Railway, along with the transit complex growing up at Dumdum.

This will improve speed and access to the city but not the actual conditions of travel. The latter would require massive investment in track-laying, signalling, and acquisition and protection of new rolling stock. The separate terminal planned for South-Eastern Railway at Shalimar will obviously ease the multiple pressures on Haora Station as well as Haora Bridge. Another proposed terminal, on the Sealdah Section at Bidhan Nagar, is unlikely to materialize soon.

Substantial improvement of the suburban railways seems impossible without general economic uplift of the suburban zone. But the railways are centrally funded: money need not be lacking if the long-overdue decision is taken to spend it. Inner-city transport, other than the Metro and the Circular Railway, is state-funded; and despite the major inputs of the CUTP, heavy long-term investment is more uncertain. But much can be achieved by internal economy, just as better traffic operations can compensate for the inevitable paucity of road space.

There are two facts that Calcuttans tend to overlook or even deny. The general maintenance of the city roads seems, with some deplorable exceptions, to be marginally better than before, though that of the CBD is worse than its laudable pre-1960 standards. And the rigours of public transport, however appalling still, have lessened marginally over the last decade and a half. The challenge of Calcutta's transport is less daunting than that of, say, its drainage or sewerage. There seems no reason why in the medium term, transport in Calcutta should not meet the norms of civilized urban life.



THE CALCUTTA METRO



Tathagata Roy

As Calcutta celebrates its tercentenary, its fledgeling Metro will quietly enter the sixth year of its existence. What in the developed countries is the standard prop of an urban transport system, is in India a belated innovation, first introduced in Calcutta.

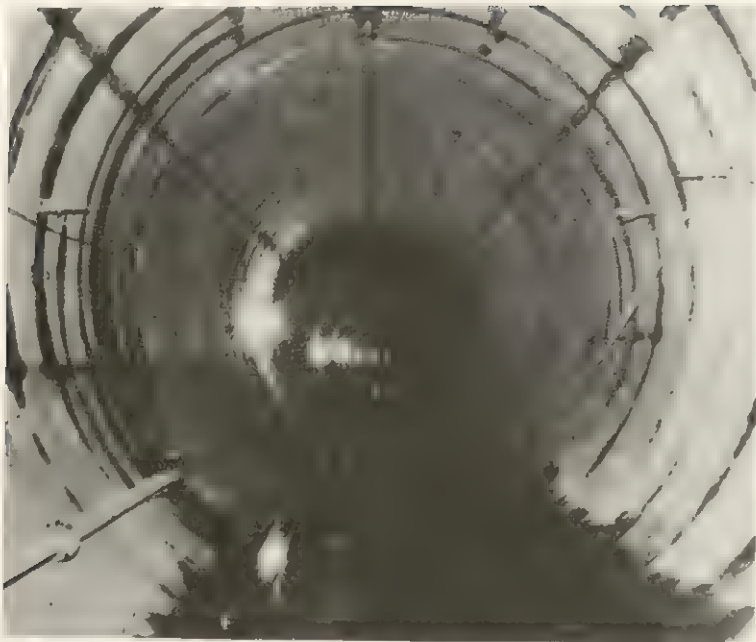
Conceived in scepticism, planned in doubt and built among brickbats and catcalls, the southern leg of the Calcutta Metro has been a reality for the last few years, and the completion of the northern section is awaited expectantly. A small band of people, some of them now outside and some still inside the Metro Rail Bhavan on Chourangi, cannot hide their pride about this. Almost all of them are men of the Indian Railways, most of them engineers of different disciplines. They are the ones who made the Metro possible.

These people have lived through years of inquisition and sage advice. It was first argued that you could not have a Metro in a city built on a swamp. As the Metro men proceeded with their messy digging, visiting Bhabanipur became a major undertaking, and the local residents passed from impatience to indignation to anger. A poster appeared, *Patal Rail ki Rabaner sinri?* Is the Metro like King Ravana's legendary staircase to heaven, begun but never finished? There were also complaints of bankruptcies and distress sales among the beleaguered businessmen of Bhabanipur.

The first run from Esplanade to Bhabanipur in October 1984 generated some cautious

optimism alongside the accustomed wisecracks. In April 1986 the run was extended to Tollyganj. Citizens got used to the Metro, though they still felt a residual disbelief at the cleanliness and the punctuality, a sense that this could not last. Gradually came the falling in love: taking visitors from other cities through the shining tunnels with proprietary pride. Calcutta's Metro is not only a technological achievement but, uniquely, a social phenomenon. Is there any other city where the metro means so much?

An underground railway for Calcutta was conceived as early as in 1949 by that great visionary Dr Bidhanchandra Ray. He invited an advisory team from the Compagnie du Chemin de Fer Metropolitan de Paris, but their suggestion was not implemented. Several other reports followed: the Terminal Facilities Report, the Sarangapani Report, the Garbutt Report, the Frieling Report and finally the D'Costa Report of the Metropolitan Transport Team of the Planning Commission in 1968. It was on the basis of the last-mentioned report that the Metropolitan Transport Project (Railways) was set up in 1969 under the Ministry of Railways, Government of India, to undertake a techno-economic feasibility study for the Calcutta Metro among other things. The MTP(R) – renamed 'Metro Railway' in 1978 – identified the Dumdum-Tollyganj alignment as the most useful one for Calcutta's first underground railway, and submitted a very comprehensive



21.1 *The Calcutta Metro under construction*

report in 1972. Construction was sanctioned in June 1972 and the foundation stone laid by Mrs Indira Gandhi in December the same year. The full stretch from Tollyganj to Dumdum covers 16.45 kilometres; a little over half has been completed so far.

Why is the Metro taking so long to build? For various reasons, one can truthfully answer. Construction started in the Dumdum-Belgachhia sector to the north in May 1973 (and services opened unobtrusively on this short stretch, just over a kilometre, in November 1984). In the south, work in the Maidan area began only in November 1975, and the main public thoroughfares of Ashutosh Mukherji Road and Shyamaprasad Mukherji Road were closed for excavation as late as in December 1978. There were controversies galore: uncertainties about funding, then doubts whether the northern or southern section was to be tackled first. Considering all these, and considering the fact that the most critical stretch was begun for all practical purposes in 1979, the actual making of the Tollyganj-Esplanade section took just over seven years (and not thirteen as some say). This is scarcely excessive, especially given the extent of indigenization: foreign inputs, of both materials and knowhow, make up a small fraction of the total for the Calcutta Metro.

The 'cut and cover' method of construction was roundly criticized. It is undoubtedly messy, consisting as it does of digging a trench, building the tunnel inside it, putting back the

earth on top and restoring the road. This obviously requires massive diversion of traffic during construction, and worse still, diversion of underground utilities such as sewers, water pipes, power and telephone cables and gas mains. Yet soil reports and the state of technology made 'cut and cover' the only feasible choice. The alternative, tunnelling, was widely urged, as it has the obvious advantage of minimal surface disturbance. It was extensively used in London, which might have influenced its advocates here. But while the blue clay of London is a tunneller's paradise, the alluvium of Calcutta is more like hell. Only Metro men know the tricks that this soil is capable of. Moreover, tunnelling in Calcutta conditions requires work under 'compressed air' – that is to say, at almost twice the normal atmospheric pressure, with humidity close upon 100 per cent, temperature in the high thirties and the atmosphere misty with water droplets. The alternatives to this inhuman scenario would be prohibitively expensive. Moreover, tunnelling involves the potentially fatal risk of 'Diver's Bends' or Caisson Disease, for which the only treatment is renewed subjection to compression and subsequent re-decompression. And after all these rigours, only the 'running tunnels' could be so built – the stations, which cause the greatest disturbance, simply cannot be built by tunnelling under Calcutta conditions. Finally, almost no indigenous technology would have been available for tunnelling, whereas with 'cut and cover' the technologies available in India could be pieced together to evolve the total package required. Hence the choice of 'cut and cover', with the subtechnology known as 'diaphragm walling', on the combined grounds of reliability, cost and indigenization.

In the interests of economy again, the Calcutta Metro has reduced tunnel size and construction costs by supplying power through a 750-volt 'third line' rather than overhead lines. This has led to a suicide or two; but to guard against accidental deaths, the rail is always placed near the farther side of the track, away from the platform at stations.

By the time the entire line is ready from Dumdum to Tollyganj, the Metro will present India with other technological novelties: the Continuous Automatic Train Control (CATC) system and Automatic Fare Collection (AFC) system. The CATC will ensure total freedom from collisions even with trains running at high

speed at close intervals, while the AFC will provide for operation of the platform gates only on presentation of the correct ticket.

The ventilation system in the Metro is very elaborate. The fans and ducts, which must remain concealed from the public eye, drive huge volumes of cooled air into the system at stations and exhaust this at other points. The drainage system which prevents the Metro from drowning has to allow for the waterlogging of Calcutta streets and ensure that surface water does not enter the Metro through the drainage pipes. A firefighting system independent of the ordinary Fire Brigade has also been set up, and provides for quenching of fires with both water and chemicals.

After Dumdum to Tollyganj, what? Nothing, it seems, for the moment. The MTP(R) had prepared three project reports in 1975: one for extending the present line from Tollyganj to Garia, generally following Tolly's Nulla from Kudghat upto the Baliganj-Sonarpur railway line; another for an east-west line from Salt Lake to Ramrajatala through Haora and Shealdah, with a tunnel below the Hugli River; and a third for a second north-to-south line from Dakshineswar to Joka. However, these still await the very heavy amounts required by way of investment.

Meanwhile we can only strive for better utilization of the existing Metro by rationalizing the surface transport so as to feed traffic to it. The Metro provides an extremely high-capacity system along the spine of the city. Metro trains at two-minute intervals will be able to carry over 60,000 passengers per hour—roughly equivalent to ten fairly crowded double-decker buses, running abreast, every one and one-quarter minutes. At Dumdum and Rabindra Sarobar stations, the Metro will be fed largely by suburban trains. Elsewhere, adequate feeder bus routes must be provided




along the roads at right angles to the Metro. 21.2 *The Tollyganj Station of the Metro Rail*
The road being built from Tollyganj to Thakurpukur is expected to be of considerable use in this way. Other 'right-angled' roads such as Netaji Subhashchandra Basu Road, Rasbihari Avenue, Vivekananda Road and Dumdum Road will need to have their capacities augmented.

The Metro will not solve all Calcutta's transport problems; but it marks a very great step in the right direction. It has provided a high-capacity transit system in a city where surface transport could not possibly have proved adequate. It has raised Calcutta transport not only to tolerable but to comfortable levels, even if only on one corridor. It has proved the capacity of Indian engineers in general, and those of the Indian Railways in particular, in stepping into virgin territory and getting a difficult job done. Above all, it has restored to Calcuttans something that had been in short supply for some time: their civic pride.



WATER SUPPLY IN CALCUTTA



Anil Baran Biswas

Being a riverine city on the lower reaches of the world's largest delta gives Calcutta a great advantage as far as potable water supply is concerned. There is fairly abundant water from both surface and underground sources. The current situation as well as future prospects of water supply compare favourably with those in all other metropolitan cities of India – a fact which perhaps we do not sufficiently appreciate.

At the same time, the situation of the city also creates problems: the presence of saline marshes, the tidal incursion of saline water, and the bacterial pollution associated with water sources in the tropics. The natural problems have been compounded by the booming population, inadequate and outworn distribution system and new man-made sources of pollution. Hence water supply to the city poses many challenges today.

Surface Water

In the early days of Calcutta, affluent citizens drew water from masonry dugwells tapping the shallow groundwater zone, and the common people from ponds, tanks and streams that were often contaminated by both bacteria and salinization. Filtered water began to be supplied in 1870. A water works was set up at Palta, about 30 kilometres to the north of the city, for tapping and purifying the water of the Hugli

The Palta Water Works cover 480 acres for a mile along the riverfront. It has filter plants on two different systems: the older and slower sand filtration method and the newer rapid gravity method. Between the two, Palta can supply up to 727 million litres per day (mld). In the 1970s, after the establishment of the CMDA, the filter beds were desilted after decades of neglect, and modern treatment machinery set up. But problems exist with both the capacity of the water works and the distribution system.

The water from Palta flows through four pipes, between 42 and 72 inches in diameter, along the Barrackpur Trunk Road to the Tala reservoir and bulk pumping station. The overhead reservoir at Tala has a staggering capacity of 41 million litres – the largest in the world. It is supported by three underground reservoirs of 32, 36 and 45 million litres respectively. From Tala, the water is distributed through the city by four zonal mains, from which there branches out a vast network of smaller lines. There are 3,800 kilometres of filtered water mains in all.

The Tala Tank is an impressive sight and a landmark of the city; but although a major engineering feat, executed between 1909 and 1911, the wisdom of its construction has been questioned. To begin with, it puts excessive pressure on a single installation. Further, being located near the northern end of the municipal





22.1 Connecting the mains at the Auckland Square reservoir

area, it poses problems in distribution to the southern parts. One of the most important recent developments has been the erection of two intermediate reservoirs and booster pumping stations at Raja Subodh Mallik Square and Auckland Square, in central and south-central Calcutta respectively. Hence water can be pumped to south Calcutta more effectively than before.

However, the Tala-Palta water supply is still impracticable for areas far to the south, especially those only recently brought within the Calcutta Municipal area like Garden Reach, Behala, Tollyganj and Jadabpur. A major advance was the setting up of a separate water works at Garden Reach in 1982 to serve these areas. The Garden Reach Water Works supplies 50 mld to the citizens of southern Calcutta. With the commissioning of a low lifting pumping station this will rise to 272 mld.

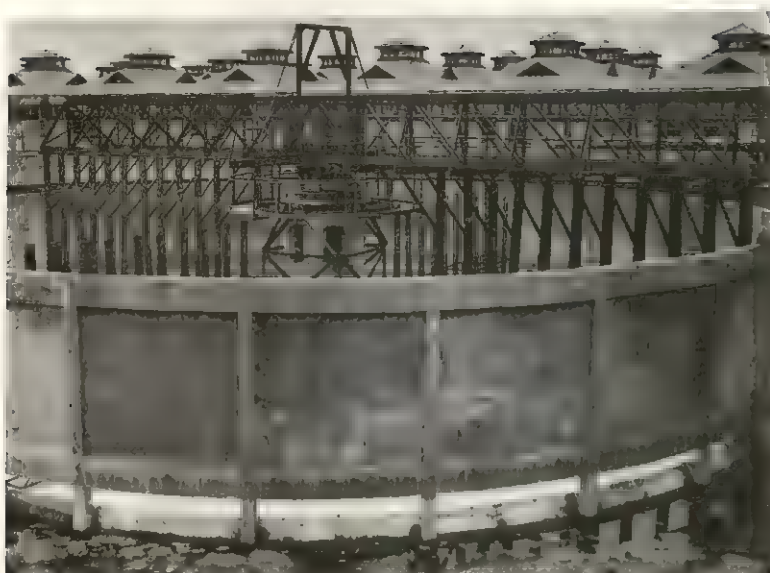
The biggest obstacle to smooth water supply in Calcutta is the state of the distribution system. The number of zonal mains is inadequate; and above all, the greater part of the pipelines has long outlived its natural life and is in an advanced state of dilapidation. Further, the quantum of water has increased without a corresponding expansion of the distribution lines, placing abnormal pressure on already weakened pipes.

Hence minor leaks are endemic, and the bursting of major pipes a not uncommon

phenomenon. A substantial amount of water is lost in transit. Relaying the mains is a long-drawn and expensive affair that can only proceed slowly. Meanwhile, the natural decay is aggravated by damage caused by digging for other public utilities, particularly the Metro Railway.

In special jeopardy is the notorious yet indispensable unfiltered water supply of 340 mld, drawn from the river through pumping stations at Mallikghat and Watganj and distributed through 1,120 kilometres of mains. This was meant chiefly for firefighting, street-washing (a sadly obsolete practice), use in latrines etc. Inevitably, it came to be used domestically by the poorer citizens, and was a major cause of the cholera epidemics that afflicted Calcutta till the 1960s. Chlorinating the unfiltered water supply dramatically reduced cholera cases from 1963. But the opprobrium brought on the unfiltered supply for this reason may have been one factor behind its particular neglect. Despite sporadic attempts to stem the decline in recent years, the very future of the supply is uncertain. The most alarming result has been the deterioration of the water hydrants for fire-fighting.

With all these constraints, the supply of surface water by the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC) has been steadily increasing: from 568 mld of filtered water in 1977 to 777 mld in 1989. Yet it falls short of the demand.



22.2 Garden Reach
Waterworks

Before we can fully assess the demand and supply, we must look at the other major source of Calcutta's water.

Ground Water

The first move to tap subsurface water in Calcutta was made as early as 1804. Twenty-three unsuccessful attempts had been made by 1838 when, for the first time, a deep borehole drilled at Fort William struck fresh water at a depth of 51.8 metres. Subsequently, several tubewells were installed by Burn & Co. Fourteen have been recorded from the early decades of this century, varying in depth from 40 to 220 metres and in output from 7,275 to 27,275 litres per hour. Between 1918 and 1940, nearly 200 medium-diameter tubewells with an average yield of 27,275 litres per hour were set up in what we today call the Calcutta Metropolitan District (CMD), between Kanchrapara and Bajbaj, chiefly to serve the jute mills. Many more were drilled during World War II to ensure an emergency water supply if required.

As the demand for water rose sharply with the population growth after Partition, it became an established policy to install heavy-duty tubewells to supplement the Tala-Palta surface water supply. The greatest number was required in the Tollyganj area, which had no other source of water till the Garden Reach Water Works was set up. Conceived as an emergency water supply scheme for five years, the arrangement has become quasi-permanent.

Nobody knows how many large-diameter

deep tubewells the city has today. The Corporation runs 235; and an unaccounted number have been installed by private industries and business, housing estates and highrise apartment blocks. There are also several thousand small-diameter tubewells, owned by private households as well as by municipal agencies for public use. The CMC alone has 7,350. A total of 136 million litres is supplied daily from groundwater sources to the CMC area.

The geological context for this exploitation must be understood. The geological foundation of Calcutta consists of a succession of clay, silt and sand layers. The remarkable feature of the lithology is the clay bed at the top, of an average thickness of 30 to 50 metres; but it can vary from 16 metres at Shibpur. Haora in the west to 54 metres at Gobra Road in the east; again from 35 metres at Barrackpur in the north to 45 metres at Shealdah in the centre, dwindling again in the south to 13.5 metres near Naktala and 17 metres at Garden Reach. Lower down, there is again a continuous sequence of clay from about 300 metres, as revealed by boreholes as far apart as Beliaghata and Garden Reach.

In between these two layers of clay is a succession formed of sand and occasional gravel, interspersed with clay and silt. It is here that we find the aquifers or water-bearing zones, consisting of medium to coarse sand and pebble, generally in the depth zone of 60 to 180 metres. The aquifers may be broken by clay or silt beds; but these are not continuous, so that the various aquifers are interlinked. Above and below the aquifers, however, there are (as explained above) clay layers of low permeability. The water in the aquifers is thus stored and sealed by nature, awaiting human use.

The upper clay layer also contains water which is tapped by shallow dug wells. The water table of this shallow zone lies within two or three metres of the land surface. But only the deeper aquifers yield water in economic quantities for major exploitation.

Tests have been carried out, most extensively by the Geological Survey of India, to determine the transmissivity of Calcutta's underground water-bearing zones – i.e., the quantity of water that will flow horizontally through a fully saturated aquiferous layer over a given width (usually 1 metre) in a given time under one unit of hydraulic head difference. The northern parts of the Calcutta Metropolitan

District have been found to have a much greater value of transmissivity, from 4,124 to 5,228 square metres a day. At the southern end, it was found to be only 640 square metres a day at Harinabhi and 1,560 square metres a day at Bajbaj. This clearly indicates that the southern part of the CMD has a much lower potential for groundwater exploitation. Yet ironically, it is currently the south – even within the CMC area or inner Calcutta – that is most reliant on groundwater sources.

This lower availability and greater exploitation of groundwater produces consequences reflected in other surveys relating to the level of the pressure surface or piezometric surface – i.e., the level to which water in the deeper aquifer, held under pressure by the layers above it, will rise automatically if a shaft is sunk into the aquifer.

A survey conducted in 1956 in the inner city and northern suburbs gauged the depth of the piezometric surface in the post-monsoon period as descending from 4.27 metres near South Sinthee Road in the north to 5.64 metres near Gariahat Road in the south. A much larger survey was conducted in the post-monsoon period of 1985, from Barrackpur in the north to Thakurpukur in the south. This found the depth of the piezometric surface to be only 1.78 to 2.65 metres in the Barrackpur area; but it had already become 5.55 to 7.75 metres between Khardah and Dum Dum, then 9.3 to 12 metres in the northern fringe and central part of the CMC; and 11 to 13.38 metres in the south central area. (The greatest depth, 13.38 metres, was recorded at Shambhunath Pandit Street.) It then rose marginally, being 10.75 to 12.05 metres in Behala and Tollyganj and 6.42 to 7.8 metres at Thakurpukur.

Collating the results of the two surveys, we find once again a progressive decline in underground water levels towards the south. But more crucially, we cannot but take heed of the overall decline in such water levels everywhere. At any given point, the 1985 level was markedly lower than that in 1956, the extent varying from 3.84 metres at Tiljala to 9.75 metres at Bhabanipur. This has obviously been caused by large-scale tapping of groundwater.

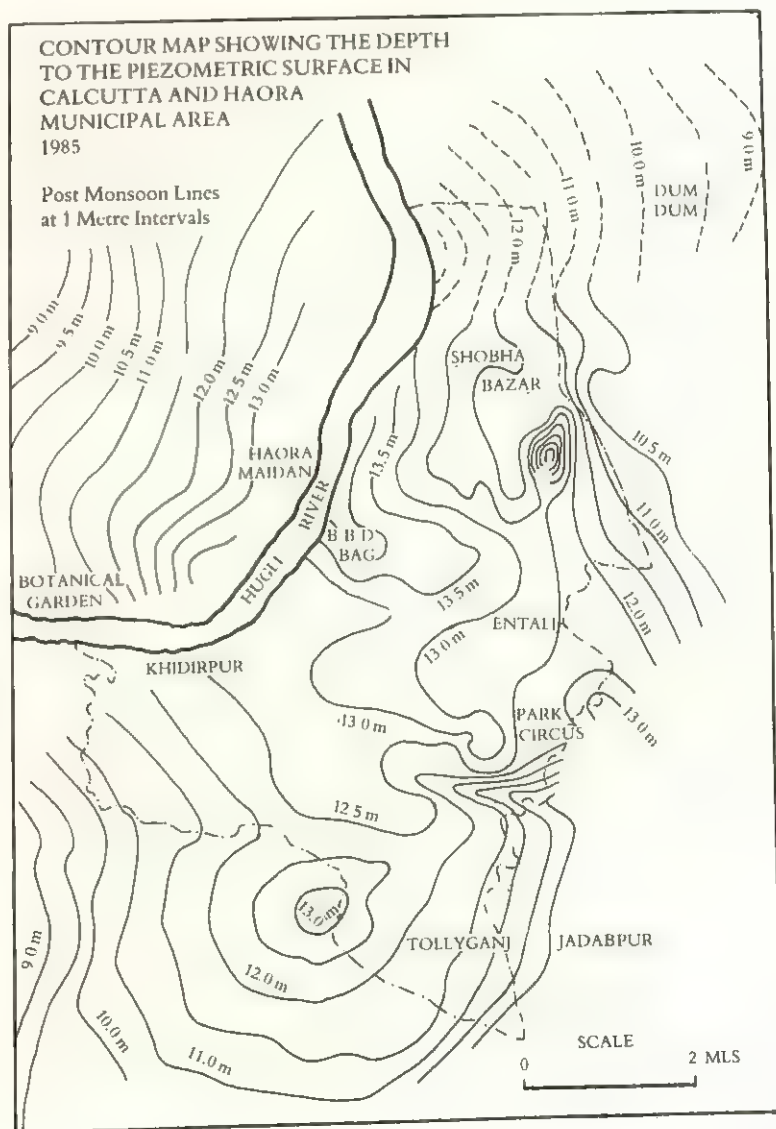
Another marked feature revealed by the 1985 survey is a zone of specially low groundwater levels in south and central Calcutta and eastern Haora. This zone runs roughly north-west to south-east, from central Haora and Shibpur to

Dhakuria. The maximum decline so far recorded is at Brabourne Road; but the centre of the depression is roughly in the area between Khidirpur at one end and Park Street and Camac Street at the other.

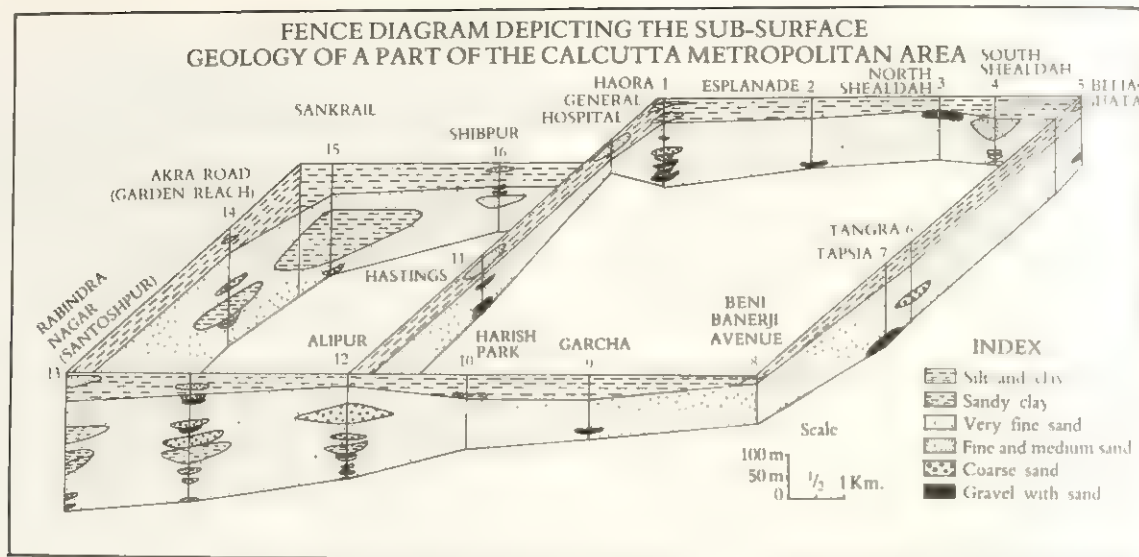
This is again owing to sustained withdrawal of groundwater by heavy-duty tubewells. Where such exploitation has been less, as in the southern suburbs, the level rises again somewhat, in spite of the general southward decline that we noted earlier. Human exploitation has here disturbed the natural trend.

In a general way, groundwater has been withdrawn in inner Calcutta, particularly the centre and south, in excess of its annual replenishment. Obviously such exploitation cannot continue forever. It also poses hazards of

22.3 Post-monsoon piezometric surface levels in the Calcutta region



22.4 Diagram of the sub-surface geology of the Calcutta region



land subsidence. It is therefore advisable not to increase – indeed if possible to restrict – the tapping of groundwater within the limits of the CMC.

At the same time, we cannot place a ban on controlled and scientific withdrawal. In the northern parts of the Calcutta Metropolitan District, especially the Barasat area, drillings have revealed the presence of huge underground water reserves. This water is moreover of high quality, with low pollution levels. Such areas augur well for groundwater withdrawal, which can then also be supplied to the CMC.

Amount of Supply: Today and Tomorrow

Town planning norms stipulate a domestic water supply of 182 litres (40 gallons) per capita per day (lcd). In Calcutta, however, the large day-time commuter population makes for extra demand. There is also a large wastage factor for reasons described below. Hence the CMPO Basic Development Plan for Calcutta, brought out in 1966, recommended provision for 272 lcd (60 gallons) in the Calcutta and Haora Municipal areas and 227 lcd (50 gallons) in the rest of the CMD. In the CMC area, with a population of 3.3 million by the 1981 census, this works out to some 900 million litres a day (mld). The more conservative estimate of the WHO Master Plan, distinguishing between high-consumption and low-consumption users, postulates an average of 227 lcd in the Calcutta municipal area, totalling nearly 750 mld. Even by this stipulation, the demand in the year 2001 will be 927 mld.

The Calcutta Municipal Corporation has raised the supply from surface water sources to 777 mld. Another 136 mld is available from groundwater sources. The supply can thus reach 913 mld. In other words, officially at least, there is no shortfall at all, even granted the rise in population since 1981. In the original 104-sq-km CMC area, the per capita supply is now said to be 259 litres per day.

However, further rise will annul this happy situation unless new measures are taken. Moreover, 26-30 per cent of the water supplied goes to waste. An appreciable amount is lost through leakage in the outworn pipes and reservoirs. Another cause is the damaged and neglected state of the public taps or standposts in slum areas and on roadsides. There are some 8,000 standposts in the CMC area, and about 60 per cent of the water flowing through them is thought to be wasted. Yet in the present state of civic amenities for the poor, they cannot be done away with; and every conceivable means of ensuring their controlled use and proper maintenance has failed.

Yet thanks to this very system of public standposts, the poor citizen of Calcutta is considerably better provided with water than his counterparts in other Indian cities. However, there is cause for concern about the quality of the water he uses. Calcutta's notorious cholera epidemics have shrunk over the last twenty-five years to a mere handful of cases annually; but gastro-enteritis, hepatitis, dysentery and other water-borne diseases are rife. This is partly owing to the lack of sufficient clean water supplied through the municipal

system; partly too, it is owing to contamination of that system itself.

Quality and Pollution

Water supplied from the Palta Water Works is expected to be chemically and bacteriologically pure after the treatment it has undergone. But impurities are reintroduced as the water passes through the supply pipes, which are contaminated in various ways. It must be remembered that leaks and breaches do not only let out water; they let in pollutants within the pipes. This is particularly likely because the water supply is not continuous: it flows for only six to seven hours a day, and when it stops, a vacuum is created in the pipes, sucking in pollutants from outside. The greatest risk of pollution, of course, occurs in the rainy season, when flooding increases the chances of surface water being contaminated by sewage and garbage washings. This polluted water then enters the pipes in the manner described above.

Calcutta's groundwater has also been found to contain bacteria, rendering chlorination advisable. But needless to say, the major hazard from groundwater comes from the concentration of certain chemical constituents beyond safe limits. The chemical composition of Calcutta's groundwater varies greatly even over very short distances. Its chloride content, for instance, ranges from 14 to 1,015 parts per million (ppm), the maximum desirable being 250 ppm. It is low in north central Calcutta, in the Raja Rammohan Ray Sarani area, as well as in parts of south Calcutta like Park Circus, Hastings and Keyatala. But elsewhere in south-east and south-west Calcutta, as well as in Bidhan Nagar City and other north-eastern areas, the chloride concentration is extremely high. The iron content of Calcutta's groundwater is also above the desirable limit of 0.3 ppm: it varies from 0.35 to 11 ppm.

The water in certain pockets also has a high saline content, probably from remnants of saline water trapped during deposition of deltaic sediments in the sea that once flowed in what is now lower Bengal. The salinity has been diluted by later influx of fresh water from the recharge areas lying in the north; but the wide variations in salinity, chloride content and total dissolved solids show that the process has not been uniform. This is another reason for circumspection in the use of groundwater.

Water Supply Outside the CMC Area

When the CMPO prepared its Basic Development Plan in 1966, it found that many of the municipalities then extant in the CMD had no filtered water at all, and the rest an inadequate supply. Only Kalyani, a new, planned and thinly-populated township, ensured a supply of 182 lcd (40 gallons). The average for the other municipal areas was 56 lcd. The parts of the CMD not under municipalities had no public water supply system whatsoever.

The Basic Plan proposed a supply of 227 lcd (50 gallons) outside the Calcutta and Haora municipal areas. This might be realistically scaled down to 182 lcd as in the WHO Master Plan. In 1981, the Hugli-Chunchura authorities provided 161 lcd, Champdani 136 lcd, Rishra 132 lcd and Baranagar 123 lcd. On the other hand, North Dumdum only afforded 13 lcd, New Barrackpur 14 lcd, and several other areas below 45 lcd. This was often grossly below the



22.5 Contenders at a roadside tap.



22.6 'Troubled waters': fight at a roadside tap. Cartoon by Haripada Ray

installed capacity. New Barrackpur, for instance, could have ensured an optimum supply of 109 lcd against the actual 14 lcd, and Bali 70 lcd instead of 17 lcd. (In that year, the Calcutta Municipal Corporation supplied over 200 lcd out of a possible 222 lcd.)

Outside the CMC area, water is supplied almost entirely from groundwater sources. A water works has recently been set up at Padmapukur in Haora to treat surface water; another is projected for Shirampur and a third for Baranagar. But for the rest, the outer parts of the CMD must rely on groundwater for the foreseeable future. The only major departure is likely to be an ambitious scheme for linking Bidhan Nagar (Salt Lake), Dumdum and South Dumdum municipal areas to the Tala-Palta network of the CMC. It will require a new unit at the Palta Water Works as well as a new underground reservoir at Tala. The target is 91 mld.

In 1981, thirty-five corporations and municipalities of the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration (CUA) had a total water demand of 1532 mld. By 2001, this is expected to rise to 2386 mld. The gap between existing supply and optimum possible supply from installed capacity is considerable; so is that between the latter and the

TABLE 1 Existing, Optimum and Ideal Supply of Water in Select Municipalities in MLD in the Calcutta Metropolitan Area, 1981

Municipalities/ Corporations	Existing Supply (MLD)	Optimum Supply (MLD)	Ideal Supply (MLD)
Baidyabati	2.72	7.27	10.91
Baranagar	20.18	28.27	32.18
Chandani	9.32	9.82	10.91
Dumdum	2.04	6.82	9.00
Hugli-Chunchura	22.13	25.27	24.00
Kamarhati	10.50	17.18	40.91
New Barrackpur	0.55	4.36	10.54
North Dumdum	2.00	3.77	31.82
Panihati	3.86	13.18	43.64
Shrirampur	7.82	15.41	19.64
South Dumdum	7.95	21.36	52.19

ideal supply at 182 lcd. The attached table gives an idea of the shortfalls to be met.

The challenges are enormous; but so are the water resources. And the performance of some municipalities as well as the CMC and the Kalyani Notified Area shows that success is amply within our grasp.



DRAINAGE, SEWERAGE AND WASTE DISPOSAL



K. J. Nath and Arunava Majumdar

The Improvement Committee or 'Lottery Committee' set up by Lord Wellesley in 1804 used its funds to develop the city of Calcutta in many ways. But it did not undertake any project for drainage, sewerage or disposal of the city's refuse. Nor, despite ambitious proposals, was any such work taken up by the Fever Hospital Committee established in 1840. Calcutta continued to be a dirty, unhealthy city with ill-kept roads and stinking open drains and, consequently, an unsavoury reputation among visitors from other lands.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the sanitary needs of the city were attended to at last. Just as a filtered water supply system was laid down, an underground drainage system was also installed, and arrangements made for the collection and disposal of garbage or 'solid waste'.

Drainage and Sewerage

The drainage and sewerage systems of Calcutta must be discussed together because they function together. The original drainage system had been designed as a 'combined' system for the disposal of storm water as well as sewage or 'dry-weather flow'.

The core of the system had been proposed in 1855, sanctioned in 1859, and laid down between 1860 and 1875. A big sewer, 8 feet high and 6 feet wide, was constructed beneath the city's principal streets and linked with smaller

underground cross sewers. The designer was William Clark, then Chief Engineer of Calcutta Corporation. This original system, known as Clark's Sewerage Scheme, was modified and supplemented down to 1896. It covered an area of 7.5 square miles (19.2 square kilometres) in the Town or central area, and involved setting up a drainage pumping station at Palmer's Bridge.

Under the Suburban Sewerage Scheme executed between 1891 and 1906, 12.5 square miles (32 sq km) in the newer southern areas of the city were brought under sewerage. A new pumping station was constructed at Baliganj, and the capacity of the Palmer's Bridge station augmented.

The drainage system that resulted from these labours could dispose of storm water from 6 mm. ($\frac{1}{4}$ inch) rainfall per hour plus 40 gallons (182 litres) of sewage per inhabitant per day. This 'combined drainage' flow was brought through the underground sewerage network to Palmer's Bridge and Baliganj pumping stations. It was then pumped into high-level sewers meeting at a place called 'Tapsia A'. From here the discharge flowed by gravity directly into Raja Khal, a creek of the tidal river Bidyadhari.

Burdened with the outfall of the entire city's drainage system, the Bidyadhari began to show signs of rapid deterioration. In 1928, the Government declared it to be a dead river. The city was almost trapped in a drainage deadlock.



23.1 Inside the
Baliganj Pumping
Station



At this juncture, Dr Birendranath Dey (1891-1963), who later became Chief Engineer of Calcutta Corporation, came to the rescue with a new scheme for both the outfall and the internal drainage system. Dr Dey's outfall scheme comprised:

1. A lined dry-weather flow channel from Tapsia point A to the river Kultigong at Ghusighata, discharging into the river through a sluice at the outfall.
2. A storm-water flow channel (the Suburban Head Cut) from Baliganj drainage pumping station to the Kultigong at Ghusighata, discharging through the sluice mentioned under (1).
3. Another storm-water flow channel (the Town Head Cut) direct from Palmer's Bridge pumping station, joining the dry weather flow channel mentioned under (1) at Bantala, where provision was made for two sedimentation tanks for primary treatment of the dry weather flow.
4. A third storm water flow channel from the Dhapa Lock pumping station, joining the channel mentioned under (3) at Makalpota.

Dr. Dey's Scheme – which undertook a much-needed separation of storm-water and

dry-weather flows – constituted the third stage in the development of Calcutta's drainage and sewerage system. It was commissioned – with some gaps – in 1943. Since that time, it has undergone major modifications and expansion to meet the rapid growth of the city's area and population. The modifications were generally carried out in accordance with the Master Plan prepared by the WHO for water supply, sewerage and drainage for the Calcutta Metropolitan District from 1966 to 2001.

The area draining into the Calcutta drainage outfall system has been divided into five sectors: (1) the Northern Sector or Kashipur area; (2) the Central Sector or Town System; (3) the South Central Sector or Suburban System; (4) the Southern Sector or Tollyganj area; (5) the Eastern Sector or Maniktala area.

The Northern Sector discharges partly into the Bagjola Canal and partly into the River Hugli. This area is subdivided into four sections. The northernmost drains into the Bagjola Canal; so does the central section, through the drainage pumping stations at Birpara and Dattabagan, and the southern section, through the latter station. The remaining area, west of Barrackpur Trunk Road, drains into the Hugli.



The Central Sector, covered by the original Town System, runs from Galiff Street in the north to Park Street in the south, and from the river on the west to the Circular Canal and the Shealdah-Baliganj railway line on the east. As explained above, this area drains partly by a dry-weather flow channel and partly by a storm-water flow channel (the Town Head Cut) through Palmer's Bridge pumping station. During the monsoons, however, some quantity of storm water is discharged into the Hugli River through a number of overflow arrangements.

The South Central Sector, covered by the Suburban System, runs from Acharya J.C. Basu Road, Park Street and Tapsia Road in the north to the Baliganj-Bajbaj railway line on the east. This area is drained by a dry-weather flow channel as well as a storm-water flow channel (the Suburban Head Cut) through the Baliganj pumping station – again with some means of discharging part of the storm water flow into the Hugli during the monsoons.

The Southern Sector, covering the Jadabpur and Tollyganj area, drains partly into Tolly's Nulla and partly into the Suburban Head Cut storm-water channel through Panchannagram Canal.

The Eastern Sector, to the east of the Circular Canal, discharges partly through the Dhapa Lock pumping station and partly into Krishnapur Canal. The discharge from the Dhapa Lock station flows through an open channel and meets the Town Head Cut storm-water channel at Makalpota.

The figure on p.171 gives the salient data about the city's drainage and sewerage system.

Calcutta is notorious for waterlogging in the rainy months, though its extent and duration have recently been reduced. The waterlogging is commonly ascribed to the fact that the ground profile of the city slopes away from the river towards the east. But in fact, eastward drainage does not pose a major obstacle, as the outfall sewers leading to the pumping stations at Palmer's Bridge and Baliganj are never flooded. Most of the pockets of chronic waterlogging are situated where the sewers have a north-south alignment, as on Raja Rammohan Sarani, Bidhan Sarani (at Thanthania), Rabin-dra Sarani, Mirza Ghalib Street, Camac Street and Sharat Basu Road.

Another common belief, that waterlogging is due to the surcharged state of the sewers, is also



not generally tenable. The water first accumulates at the edges or along the kerbs of the roads, and gradually swells till it covers the middle. We do not find that water is escaping outwards from the sewers through the gully-pits, nor are air-bubbles seen emerging from the manholes in times of flood, as would be the case if the sewers could not contain the water flowing into them. On the contrary, it is a common practice to open manhole covers so that the accumulated water may enter the sewers more easily. We also see that, for instance, the western part of B.B. Ganguli Street can get flooded even by moderate rain, while the eastern part, although further down the line of flow, is not flooded even during heavy rain.

What then causes the waterlogging? In Calcutta, the roads occupy only 6 to 8 per cent of the total surface. The storm-water run-off from the roofs and courtyards of houses is discharged onto this inadequate road surface, instead of draining into the sewers through yard gullies, which are often faultily constructed. Moreover, the gully pits on the roads, through which the water should drain out, are inadequate in number and often choked owing to lack of

23.2 A waterlogged street



23.3 Laying of new sewers at Gurusaday Road

maintenance. Further, the rain washes solid waste to the mouths of the gully pits, blocking the free flow of water into them.

Another problem is heavy siltation of the sewers, reducing their carrying capacity. This should be met by regular de-silting; but the volume of such efforts, though much augmented recently, does not match the accumulation. Again, although the capacity of almost all the drainage pumping stations has been augmented, it is still not adequate in times of heavy rain, specially owing to mechanical failure of pumps.

Finally, the outfall channels of the Calcutta drainage system are proving inadequate, as their carrying capacity has been reduced through the deposition of silt and dirt, carried in huge quantity in the city's sewage. The outfall system flows mainly towards the east, ultimately finding its way to the Kultigong. Some of these outfall channels were meant for navigational purposes as well, but can no longer serve this latter function. Such is the case with the Krishnapur Canal; also with Tolly's Nulla, once an inland waterway linked to the river Bidyadhari. Today Tolly's Nulla is simply a tidal creek, receiving large quantities of pollutants from the adjoining areas: effluents from septic tanks and cowsheds, industrial discharge, nightsoil, solid waste and dead animals. Such contamination of a stream flow-

ing through the heart of south Calcutta, along the holy bathing ghats, shows our lack of environmental ethics.

There is urgent need to revitalize the city's sewerage system. Gully pits and sewers must be desilted regularly; the number of gully pits should be enhanced, and the size of branch and lateral sewers increased; the sewers and yard gullies within private premises should also be revitalized. The WHO Master Plan recommended the installation of sewers with a capacity of two months' frequency — i.e., adequate to clear a volume of rain that occurs once in two months, or six times a year, on an average. In general, this Master Plan needs to be followed strictly, perhaps with slight modifications to suit changed conditions. The size of drainage pumps needs to be augmented as per hydraulic design, and the pumps maintained properly, so that the pumping stations can function adequately during the rains. Further, the channels and canals of the outfall system should be desilted regularly, and intermittent silt traps provided along their course. Their navigability should also be restored where it existed formerly.

It is to be regretted that Calcutta does not yet have a full-fledged sewage treatment plant. There is only a primary treatment plant at Bantala to treat a part of the sewage. It contains two sedimentation tanks, each with a capacity of 273 million litres a day, two sludge pump-houses and twelve sludge lagoons. Even this plant has ceased to function. It needs to be recommissioned urgently, and placed under the Calcutta Municipal Corporation: at present it is in the charge of the Irrigation and Waterways Directorate.

Calcutta does, however, possess a unique system for the utilization of sewage in the eastern suburbs of the city. For a long time now, the vast wetland there has supported sewage-fed fisheries which supply a considerable quantity of fish to the Calcutta market. Sewage irrigation is also practised to produce vegetables for bulk supply to the city. However, the optimum utilization of such sewage-fed wetlands can only be possible under properly controlled conditions. We may propose that an ecologically balanced wastewater management system should be developed near Bantala, where enough land is available for the purpose.

Solid Waste

Calcutta generates well over 2,000 metric tons of solid waste (i.e., garbage or refuse) each day. The latest figure cited by the Calcutta Municipal Corporation is 2,600 metric tons. In the inner city, garbage is collected from the locality – though the facilities for house-to-house collection are limited – and deposited in street vats or pick-up stations. These sometimes spill over, blocking a portion of the road. From the vats, the refuse is transported by trucks to the dumping ground for uncontrolled open dumping. At present, the major dumping ground is at Bantala. The West Bengal Agro-Industries Corporation has installed a mechanical compost plant here that can handle 125 to 150 metric tons of solid waste per day.

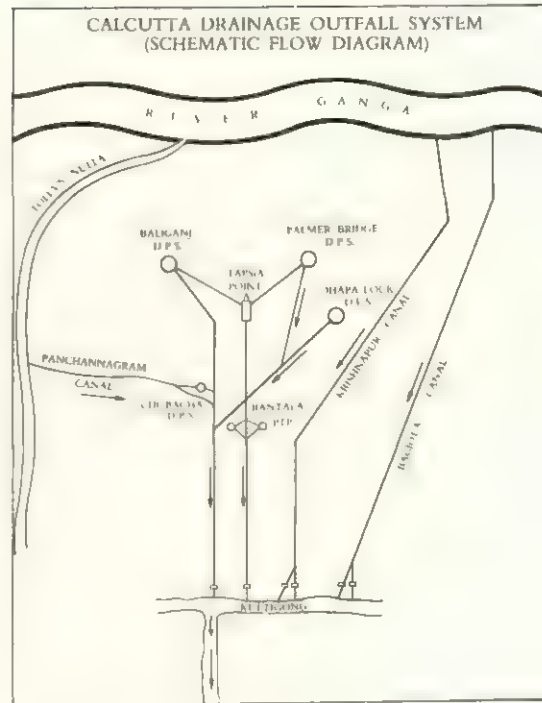
This system of solid waste disposal is neither technologically sound nor acceptable from a civic and aesthetic point of view. More scientific, and also less unpleasant, would be the sanitary land-filling method of disposal – that is, the filling of low-lying areas with alternate layers of solid waste and earth. But this method is not practised in Calcutta. The collection and transportation of the city's refuse is also far below the optimum level. There are deficiencies both in personnel management and in the management and maintenance of equipment, which pushes up the cost of waste disposal and also creates backlogs.

Calcutta urgently needs a system of solid waste management which is technically sound, economically feasible and politically and socially acceptable. The interlinked stages in the process are (a) the collection of refuse, (b) its transportation, and (c) its disposal.

The collection system involves the most efficient utilization of men and machines. It needs a thorough understanding of local conditions, as well as wide experience of refuse-collecting methods and the application of engineering economics. It should be appreciated that there is no substitute for such careful planning by experts. Attempts to economize on planning expenses can finally cost the city many times the amount saved.

A successful garbage collection system for Calcutta would include:

1. Optimal collection on each trip made by a collecting vehicle: in other words, the most productive balance between the number of



trips per day, crew size and tonnage collected per trip. 23.4 Diagram of the drainage outfall system

2. Optimal routing and scheduling of the vehicles.
3. Improved repairing and maintenance of vehicles and equipment, to ensure the lowest possible operating cost in relation to the amount of refuse collected.
4. Sound personnel management and correct monitoring and field reporting of the removal operations.

Let us consider the problem in more concrete terms. Calcutta's streets are cluttered with refuse owing to indiscriminate throwing of waste, indicating a general lack of public awareness; also owing to roadside stalls and pavement habitations. There are over a hundred markets in the city which contribute 450 to 500 metric tons of solid waste a day. During the rains, the refuse chokes the gully pits, preventing the water from draining away. The practice of watering the streets to clean them has long been discontinued. So in good measure has the house-to-house collection of garbage, though it is understood that the Corporation plans to re-introduce this, ward by ward, as far as practicable.

The Corporation has also carried out some other improvements. Pay-loaders now operate to clear roadside vats swiftly and efficiently. Some vats have been replaced by containers,



23.5 The Calcutta
Municipal Corporation
headquarters

which are transported to the disposal ground by roll-on-off tippers.

A ward-depot system of garbage collection has been introduced in the city, whereby the ward depot acts as the primary transfer station for refuse. The waste is directly transferred from the handcart which first collects it to the carrier-container that will take it to the dumping-ground. This eliminates the double handling involved in the use of vats, and moreover removes these unwelcome obstacles from the streets.

As regards disposal, it is essential that the sanitary land-fill method should be introduced immediately. If the full-fledged method – with alternate layers of refuse and earth – proves unfeasible, at least a modified form should be adopted, with only final earth coverage. The great problem with this method is, of course, the availability of adequate land. Steps should be taken at once to acquire such land for

long-term future needs. Calcutta needs approximately 34 hectares of land per annum for filling to a depth of 3 metres.

The solid waste from markets is eminently suitable for conversion into compost. As stated above, there is one compost plant at present with a capacity of 125 to 150 metric tons. As Calcutta's markets produce 450 to 500 metric tons of solid waste a day, there is material for another three or four plants. These should be located keeping potential markets for the compost in view.

Calcutta's refuse can also produce bio-gas. The potential for bio-gas is now under study. Let us hope that commercial supply of bio-gas to the city will be found to be feasible in the near future.

Salvaging of recyclable materials from solid waste is an established occupation in Calcutta. At least 10 per cent of the waste is recycled at various stages from generation to disposal. The scavengers are poor people who work privately. A well-organized system of salvage would no doubt prove more beneficial and profitable, and the possibilities should be explored.

It is beyond debate that, unless massive development of Calcutta's civic infrastructure is carried out urgently, the city will face a severe crisis in the foreseeable future. One of the most crucial areas is drainage and sanitation. It is heartening that both the Union and the State Governments, as well as international agencies, have concerned themselves at last with the resurrection of the city. Concerted efforts are under way, by engineers, scientists and technicians in the field and academics and research workers at various institutions. But the true catalyst for success must be a well-informed and concerned public.



THE EAST CALCUTTA WETLANDS



Aditi Nath Sarkar

On the eastern margin of Calcutta, there has evolved over the last half century or more a uniquely creative, symbiotic relationship between 'Town' and 'Country'. By this relationship, thirty-odd villages to the east of Calcutta City take the huge quantities of solid urban waste, liquid sewage (including toxic effluents) and polluted air generated by the metropolis, and recycle them into clean air, fresh water, organic nutrients and a daily supply of fresh fish and green vegetables for Calcutta's kitchens. In the process, they provide income and employment for the surrounding countryside.

A planner conceiving of such a scheme in the abstract would no doubt be accused of utopianism. But the scheme exists and works in the neglected backyard of Calcutta. It is technologically viable, cost-effective, ecologically sound, and adapted to local cultural realities. East Calcutta can afford us some major lessons about the future of our cities.

The land on which Calcutta is built slopes eastward, away from the river Hugli towards the eastern marshland and Salt Lakes. This marshland has always been Calcutta's natural drainage retention spill basin. Moreover, in 1865 the municipal authorities acquired a square mile of land in this region for dumping the city's garbage or solid waste.

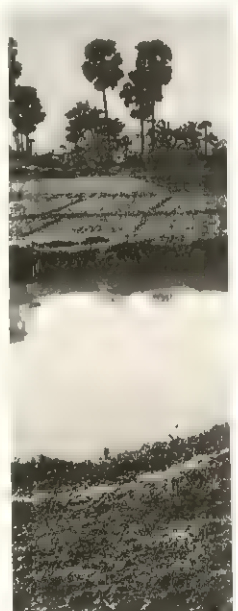
Today the Calcutta Municipal Corporation dumps 2,600 tonnes of solid waste daily in East Calcutta. The National Environmental En-

gineering Research Institute (NEERI) has estimated that the waste water discharged by Calcutta carries another 2,076 tonnes of suspended solids per day. Using this unsuspected source of productive wealth, the people of Calcutta have created an entire eco-system.

First, the solid waste is picked over by a population of several thousand rag-pickers. They remove all forms of non-organic material for resale: metal objects, bottles, foil, rubber, cork, plastics, paper, cloth, wood and unburnt coal. The pickers are usually children, earning around ten rupees a day – an important supplementary income for families whose combined population may be as high as 15,000. There seems to be an inverse relation between affluence and affinity for recycling: these families are among the most economically vulnerable in the city.

The picked-over organic garbage is reduced to humus over time. The entire area adjacent to and east of the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass has been enriched by this precious natural fertilizer. Once a garbage mound has reached its maximum height, its top is levelled by municipal bulldozers; after about a year and a half, its top and fringes start being cultivated. A recent survey indicated that 800 hectares of dump-top land alone is used for cultivation. Pigs and other livestock are also raised on the dumps.

Some 2,000 acres of land in this area are used for vegetable farming and other agriculture: nearly 55,000 tonnes of fresh vegetables annual-





Left :
24.1 A wetland fishery

Right :
24.2 Vegetable
farming on an old
garbage dump



ly make their way to Calcutta's markets from here. Such farming dates back to at least 1928, when a private entrepreneur leased land here from the Corporation and rented it out to cultivators.

Today 20,000 people are engaged in agriculture in eastern Calcutta. The garbage farms absorb about 700 tonnes of picked-over garbage daily. This raises the ground level by a quarter of an inch a year, while producing a veritable cornucopia of vegetables – in one instance, twenty-one types on a single holding.

But the ultimate in skill and ingenuity has been displayed in this region in the development of sewage-fed fisheries on 2,500 hectares of low-lying land, supplying 20 tonnes of fish daily and employing 17,000 people. The water from the sewerage canals, known locally as 'sweet' (as opposed to saline) water, is taken through channels to shallow banked-up tanks called *bheris*. The sewage water makes extremely rich fish food, and a whole discipline of informal skills has been developed to precisely judge the 'sweetness' of the sewage, the depth of the water, its weed content and other factors. The farmers are also keenly alive to market demands, and can accordingly raise everything from spawn and fingerlings to full-grown carp, tilapia and other species. The fish have been stringently examined and found to be free of all contamination.

Starting in 1930, fish-farming is now carried on in about forty *bheris*, most of them privately

owned. But only since 1970 has it been realized that the fish farms are also the most effective sewage treatment reactors possible, superior to all advanced tertiary technology. The large open bodies of water absorb the dust polluting the city air. The water also acts as settling tanks for the sediment-laden city sewage, dramatically reducing the quantity of sludge in the effluent that is ultimately discharged into the Kultigong. (The route and method have been described in the article on 'Drainage, Sewerage and Waste Disposal'.)

The shallow eutrophic lakes with multiple forms of plankton, algae and bacteria consume the organic refuse and breathe back vital oxygen into the city air. The abundant waterhyacinth along the margins effectively removes the highly toxic chemicals and metallic residue in the water. The fisheries are also 99 per cent effective in the treatment of pathogenic bacteria. The sewage entering a *bheri* contains up to 10 million *E-coli* bacteria per millilitre; the water that leaves it, only 10 to 100 per millilitre. In a word, the East Calcutta ecosystem meets every globally accepted standard of liquid waste treatment. The local people who use this water for their daily needs are not more prone to water-borne diseases: in the 1984 dysentery epidemic, not a single case was reported from East Calcutta.

This entire eco-system is now under critical threat through the eastward expansion of the city. New townships, most notably Bidhan



Nagar or Salt Lake City, have swallowed up over a quarter of the wetlands. The Eastern Metropolitan Bypass naturally attracts further development in and around the area, while the road itself acts as a dam or barrier to the natural eastward drainage flow. This has aggravated the monsoon floods in the city in recent years. The *bheris* are dwindling (from 20,000 acres in 1950 to 8,000 acres in 1988) and their supply of fish to the city has grown irregular. Vegetable production may follow suit, for the present practice of uncontrolled dumping over widespread areas obviously cannot continue for long. The disappearance of a sizeable part of the area will in any case render the rest ecologically unviable. And if the entire system breaks down, all Calcutta will face an immense crisis of drainage and conservancy, while locally in East Calcutta, 200,000 people will be impoverished.

It is not an easy situation, for the city's inexorable demand for more living space is indeed most easily satisfied in the east. Hence there is a proposal for extending Bidhan Nagar through further reclamation of the Salt Lakes, as well as other townships further south. But steps are being taken to stop encroachment and profiteering over the land adjoining the Bypass; and the Government of West Bengal has set up

an Institute for Wetland Management. More hearteningly and dramatically, local fishermen are fighting to save their environment and their traditional occupation. Co-operative fish farms produce 7 tonnes of fish annually per hectare as against 5 tonnes in the old-style *bheris* under private ownership.

The 'Operation Ganga' launched by the Government of India in 1985 calls for 'resource re-cycling' of the sewage of ten major polluted cities along the waterway. Except for the production of methane gas, all the other stated means and objectives are already amply found in East Calcutta. The 'city of the future' in Florida's Disneyworld recycles its liquid waste through similar wide eutrophic lakes. A 1985 World Bank report also calls for setting up waste 'recycling regions' of this type. Hong Kong, Changsha in China, and several West German and Israeli cities have carefully set up such regions, but no larger than 150 to 200 acres each. The East Calcutta wetlands cover some 12,500 hectares.

All over the world, urban waste is being viewed in a new light – no longer negatively, as a noisome and unproductive burden, but as an endlessly replenished resource. Unexpectedly and unglamorously, Calcutta has shown the way.

24.3 & 24.4 *The Eastern By-pass through the Dhapa wetlands*



BIDHAN NAGAR: FROM MARSHLAND TO MODERN CITY



D. P. Chatterjea



After 1947, the population of Calcutta increased so enormously that it became necessary to extend the city area. But owing to the peculiar location of Calcutta, its expansion has always posed a serious problem. It is bounded by the river on the west and marshlands and brackish lakes to the east. Hence in the normal way, expansion has only been possible lineally to the north and south, which is neither desirable nor practicable in town planning. Moreover, after Partition, such north-and-south expansion took place almost entirely in an unplanned – indeed, uncontrollable – way.

The state's Chief Minister at the time and the architect of modern West Bengal, Dr Bidhan-chandra Ray, therefore took a revolutionary decision in consultation with planners in India and abroad: the city was to be extended eastward by filling up the marshy land there. This land consisted of two parts, the Northern and Southern Salt Lakes. The Northern, covering about 20 square miles, was nearer to the city proper and adjoined the populated areas of Ultadanga, Narkeldanga and Beliaghata. If developed, it would automatically be integrated with the city proper.

Hence it was decided that 3.75 square miles at the northern end of the Northern Salt Lake should be reclaimed and developed, along with another 0.25 square miles of occupied fringe area and the New Cut Canal to the west of it. It

was later decided to add another two square miles, though one square mile out of this could not finally be reclaimed owing to land acquisition problems.

The project was inaugurated by Dr Bidhan-chandra Ray on 16 April 1962. It is a fitting tribute to his boldness and vision that Salt Lake City is now officially called Bidhan Nagar.

Reclamation

The area to be reclaimed was low-lying and always under water. Its average ground level was only 3 feet above mean sea level, whereas Maniktala is 7.49 feet and Narkeldanga 6.49 feet – and even these are quite low and subject to serious waterlogging in the monsoons. To obviate this problem in the new city, without raising costs immeasurably, its consolidated ground level was fixed at 10.49 feet above mean sea-level. This required 100 crore cubic feet of filling material.

The usual cut-and-fill method was obviously unfeasible, as a huge tract of land would have to be sacrificed as the cutting area. Carrying the material by truck was also impracticable for such a large scheme. The alternative was to convey the filling material (preferably sand) by pipeline, mixed with enough water to allow pumping. At this time, the Hugli River was also fast silting up for want of adequate head water supply: continuous dredging was needed

to keep the navigable channel open. Two problems could be solved simultaneously by piping dredged silt from the river to fill up the Northern Salt Lake. A Yugoslav contractor was entrusted with the task after calling for tenders world-wide.

Three booster pumping stations, in addition to the main one, were set up along the five-mile pipeline. 35,000 cubic feet of solids were pumped per hour, round the clock, for nine months in the year – sufficient to reclaim an acre a day. Silt was dredged from the river between Haora Bridge and Vivekananda (Bali) Bridge, to a depth of 35 feet: this greatly improved the condition of the river. At the Salt Lake end, the reclamation area was divided by embankments into blocks, which were filled up one by one, the superfluous water draining into the nearby canal at Dhapa. Work commenced at the Ultadanga end, which was nearest to the entry point of the pipeline. Slowly, the future city began to take form.

Design and Planning

Bidhan Nagar is divided into a number of sectors, and each of these into smaller blocks. Sectors I, II and III are chiefly residential; Sectors IV and V, industrial and commercial. There is also a big central park of 153 acres.

Of the 73 blocks in Sectors I, II and III, 52 are divided into small plots where individuals can build their own houses. Another ten blocks contain big lots for housing estates – either co-operatives, or built by large organizations



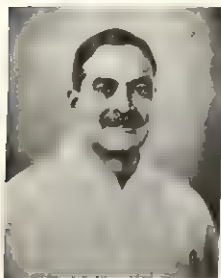
for their employees. Five blocks are earmarked for offices, three for a sports complex, two for social and recreational centres and one for a central market complex. But in addition to these central amenities, each block has its own space for a market, educational centre and playground. Several local centres have already come up. When all of them have been provided, nobody in Bidhan Nagar need travel more than 1,000 feet to meet his day-to-day needs.

The plan for Bidhan Nagar allowed adequate reserved space – a novelty in town planning in

*Above :
25.1 Reclamation
work at Salt Lake*

*Below :
25.2 The city jostles
the wetlands*





25.3 Bidhanchandra Ray

Bidhanchandra Ray

It is fitting that the most impressive new township in Calcutta should be named after Dr. Bidhanchandra Ray (1882-1962), for he was by general consent the maker of modern West Bengal, being Chief Minister of the truncated and ravaged state from 1948 until his death. His first claim to fame, however, is as a physician of almost legendary powers, one of India's leading doctors in his day. He entered politics in 1923; he was also Mayor of Calcutta from 1931 to 1933 and Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University from 1942 to 1944.

His greatest achievement as Chief Minister was surely the founding of the industrial city of Durgapur. In the Calcutta area, he conceived and began work on both the Salt Lake Reclamation Scheme and the Kalyani Township. He also set up public schemes and corporations to provide basic services, like the Calcutta State Transport Corporation and the Calcutta Milk Supply, and masterminded the expansion of the hospital and university systems in the city.

The list of projects and institutions stemming directly and indirectly from Bidhanchandra would be endless. This itself indicates his grasp of the total planning process and the interrelated nature of West Bengal's problems and requirements. The overriding problem was of course the agonizing aftermath of the Partition; and his schemes were frequently oriented to allow maximum employment and economic benefit to the East Bengal refugees.

The problems of West Bengal outlasted Bidhanchandra; but had it not been for him, they might have engulfed the state. Through his vision and his immense authority as an administrator, he endowed Calcutta and West Bengal with certain crucial systems and assets that survived a long period of turmoil and stagnation and now, though radically modified at times, can serve as the basis for future growth.

Calcutta — for post offices, banks, hotels, cinemas, hospitals and nursing homes. Apart from small playgrounds in every block, each sector has two full-size fields for football and cricket. Besides these, the biggest stadium in India, the Yuba Bharati Krirangan, has come up in Sector III along with the eastern branch of the Netaji Subhash National Institute of Sports. There is an excellent swimming pool, and a large zoo-cum-recreational park, Jhilmil, which draws large crowds from Calcutta proper in the winter.

The new city was meant to house middle and low-income citizens at reasonable cost. Hence most of the plots are fairly small — two, three or four cottahs. Also popular are six-cottah plots where co-operative societies can build eight-flat units. The number of storeys to a building is restricted, to reduce congestion. Even when Bidhan Nagar is fully occupied, its average population density will be 170 persons per acre; the maximum, in blocks with large housing estates, will be 300 per acre. In the Calcutta Municipal area, it is over 2,000 per acre in some areas.

The first private house in Bidhan Nagar was built in 1970. The first housing estate, Vidyasagar Niketan, was also occupied in 1970. Today the city houses 1.75 lakh out of a total designed population of 4.5 lakh. There is also a sizeable commuter population in its large offices. It can easily be imagined what the state of housing, and pressure on amenities, would have been in Calcutta proper if Bidhan Nagar did not exist to relieve the strain.

The attraction of Bidhan Nagar has created a problem. Through various subterfuges, the leaseholds of these cheap and attractive properties are passing into the hands of speculators and the very rich. If this trafficking is not checked effectively, Bidhan Nagar may grow more opulent than ever, but it will not fulfil its original purpose of housing the common man of Calcutta.

Sectors IV and V, meanwhile, have already begun to develop as a commercial and industrial area. Here the land is divided into big lots; but some small plots have been reserved for small-scale units, and consolidated industrial estates are also coming up, like the Saltlec complex for electronic manufacturing units. Small portions of these two sectors are also being utilized as godowns, stockyards etc., and for rehabilitation of families moved from else-

where to develop the township. Several massive office blocks have already come up in the area reserved for the purpose, fronting the Central Park. Apart from the offices of the Salt Lake Authority itself, they accommodate all or a good part of the offices of the State Electricity Board, the Public Works Department, the Metropolitan Development Department, and many statutory bodies and government undertakings. This is the first stage of a progressive shift of government offices from central Calcutta to more spacious quarters and planned surroundings here. Various factors militate against the chances of a total shift; but the process has already begun.

Roads and Transport

While in Calcutta proper, roads cover only 6 per cent of the surface area, in Bidhan Nagar they constitute 23 per cent – as in New Delhi – with a total length of 22.2 km. All the arterial roads are dual carriageways; one of them is the widest road in the whole Calcutta Metropolitan area. Roads within the blocks, on the other hand, have deliberately been kept narrow, with many cul-de-sacs, to discourage through traffic. There are four major exit points into Calcutta, linked to the arterial roads running through Beliaghata, Narkeldanga, Maniktala and Ultadanga. (The Maniktala link has not yet been fully executed.) But the two proposed outlets northward towards the Airport have yet to be built: they involve putting bridges over the Krishnapur Canal, which borders Bidhan Nagar on the north.

From sparse beginnings, the bus network in Bidhan Nagar is now considerable, with a higher ratio of buses to population than anywhere else in the Calcutta Metropolitan area. The proposed tramline, however, is yet to materialize, partly owing to protests from a section of the residents. Most crucially, we have yet to learn the fate of Calcutta's second proposed Metro line, planned to run from Bidhan Nagar through Shealdah and the Central Business District and under the river to Haora. This will be imperative if Bidhan Nagar is to develop not only as a residential area but also as a major office centre.

Drainage and Sewerage

In planning for drainage and sewerage in Bidhan Nagar, care has been taken to avoid the



shortcomings of the inadequate system of old Calcutta. The latter has a combined drainage system for both storm water and household sewage. This causes choking in the rainy season and silting in the dry, and also makes it difficult to treat the discharge. Bidhan Nagar has separate systems for storm water (291 km) and household sewage (168 km). The former drains, normally by gravity, into the Krishnapur Canal either directly or via the Eastern Drainage Channel. Pumps are used where required. For household sewage, there are two pumping stations in each residential sector. The entire discharge is carried under the Krishnapur Canal to a treatment plant on the opposite bank, and the treated effluent drained into the Bagjola Canal.

25.4 Bidhan Nagar today

Water Supply

Of the present civic arrangements in Bidhan Nagar, the only unsatisfactory one is the water supply. The city lies outside the supply network of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC). Hence despite unfavourable survey



reports, water had to be supplied from underground sources. The area was divided into a number of sections, each with an expected population of 25,000 to 30,000. Every section was provided with three deep tubewells, two of which are run simultaneously. Normally the water is supplied via overhead reservoirs, but direct pumping is possible in case of emergency.

Although the designed target of 182 litres (40 gallons) per head per day is being met in this way, there are many problems. The water has a very high iron content that chokes pipes and discolours floors, clothes etc. Iron elimination plants have been installed, but do not always function. More basically, the tubewells themselves are not permanent: new ones have to be sunk regularly.

The only lasting solution is to obtain treated water by arrangement from the CMC supply lines. A plan has been drawn up for this purpose. (See the article on 'Water Resources and Supply'.) There is ground for hope that in the foreseeable future, Bidhan Nagar will have a satisfactory water supply for its entire needs even after full occupation.

Electricity

Bidhan Nagar is outside the contractual jurisdiction of the Calcutta Electricity Supply Corporation. Its electric supply was therefore entrusted to the West Bengal State Electricity Board (WBSEB). There was considerable delay in completing their work, and the Salt Lake

authorities had to supply power directly from its own work connections to a large number of houses in early years. Today, of course, the WBSEB caters to all the needs of Bidhan Nagar, with two separate lines of transmission in case one fails. The WBSEB was also been entrusted with lighting the streets and parks.

The Future

Bidhan Nagar has provided middle-class Calcuttans with the chance to build their own home virtually within the big city, yet free of most of its civic disadvantages. But the number that has benefited, however substantial, will make only a temporary dent in Calcutta's housing problem. More such developments are urgently needed to ease the relentless pressure on Calcutta's housing and business space – and the only practicable locations within striking distance of the inner city are to the east. The CMDA has already taken up two projects there – the East Calcutta Township and the Baishnabghata-Patuli Township – but they are small and will have little impact.

Of the twenty square miles of the Northern Salt Lake, only five have been reclaimed. Another one square mile has been acquired for garbage dumping from Bidhan Nagar. The rest remains – an attractive target for development, in natural continuation of both the extant reclamation and the original city of Calcutta. The challenge is to utilize this area, before it is too late, in harmony with the complex ecology of the East Calcutta wetlands.

CALCUTTA'S ENVIRONMENT

Dipankar Chakraborti

The physical problems of Calcutta's environment cannot be understood without pondering on some demographic and economic facts. The environmental problem is at its acutest in the area under the Calcutta Municipal Corporation (CMC) – the inner city of about 100 square kilometres (excluding the three former Municipalities added in 1984). This is surrounded by the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration (CUA) and, a somewhat wider area still, the Calcutta Metropolitan District (CMD).

The relative areas and populations of these concentric ranges of settlement are as follows:

	CMC (core area)	CUA	CMA
Area (sq. kilometres)	104	852	1488
Population (millions)	3.3	9.2	10.1

The urban areas of West Bengal total 2,600 sq. km, and the urban population is 14.43 million.

In other words, inner Calcutta accounts for 4 per cent of the state's urban area but nearly 23 per cent of its urban population. Its share in the state's economic activity is even more disproportionate. 80 per cent of West Bengal's financiers and 65 per cent of its traders live here. They pay 80 per cent of its sales tax and 97 per cent of its income tax.

In four wards out of the city's 100, the population density is 1,75,000 per sq. km.; in 25, above 80,000; in the inner city as a whole, about 32,000. (The WHO recommendation is

2,500.) The accompanying table gives the relative situation in other metropolitan cities of India:

TABLE 1

City	Area in sq. km.	Density of popula- tion per sq. km.	Total popula- tion
Greater Bombay	603	13,671	8,243,450
Calcutta UA	852	10,791	9,194,018
Calcutta MC (core)	104	31,779	3,305,006
Delhi	540	10,609	5,729,283
Delhi MC	360	13,548	4,884,234
Madras	571	7,511	4,289,347
Madras MC	170	19,274	3,276,622

By contrast to this daunting concentration, the spaces surrounding the CMC area are conspicuously less urban. Only a few kilometres from the city centre, there are places that resemble big villages. The difference between the centre and the suburbs has important consequences for demography, pattern of settlement, and consequently for the environment.

On the one hand, the suburbs provide the core city with a substantial green belt, a handy source of market produce, and (in the wetlands to the east of the city) a unique eco-system into which the city's drainage, sewerage and waste disposal systems have been integrated. On the



other hand, this belt has been preserved, until recently, at the cost of the near-total neglect of rural life and economy that has characterized Indian administration for the last 200 years. This has meant that the rural poor, as well as the ambitious and relatively affluent, have flocked to the city. Hence the city has continued to expand and, in doing so, eaten into this non-urbanized hinterland itself.

The expansion seems set to continue. The CMDA estimates that by the year 2011, when the population of the CMD will reach 18 million, its open space will be reduced from the present 690 sq. km. to around 300 sq. km., implying a loss of around 400 sq. km. of not only green space but fertile agricultural land. The implications for Calcutta's environment as well as its economy can easily be imagined.

Moreover, the greater part of the migrants are poor and resourceless people who gather in slums and shanty towns and even on roads and open spaces, creating new vicious environmental cycles of which they themselves are the chief victims. Between 1971 and 1981, the city's population grew by 4.8 per cent, but the slum population by 8.4 per cent. In 1983, 45 per cent of households in the CMD had a monthly income of Rs 150 to Rs 350; 26 per cent of Rs 350-600. Only 5 per cent earned more than Rs 1,500. Such urban poverty is reflected in the Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI), which takes note of longevity, child mortality, shelter, availability of water, sanitation, educational facilities, power supply and health. The PQLI for Calcutta has not yet been measured; but who can doubt that it will be deeply disturbing? Bombay is facing a comparable prospect. The following table shows how it is, if anything, in a somewhat worse state.

TABLE 2

	Greater Bombay	Calcutta City
Percentage of slum population to total population	51.03	49.34
Percentage of slum population employed in informal sector	80	70
Percentage of migrants among slum & pavement dwellers	86	93

In an urban situation like this, physical pollution is the outcome of what we may call economic pollution. Indeed, in the Third World as a whole, poverty is the greatest

pollutant. The next greatest is ignorance, callousness and negligence, even among the formally educated; those who throw out garbage from the high-rise window or puff at an illicit cigarette in a mini-bus. The chemical contamination of air or water is merely a tertiary development from these deeper causes

Calcutta's Physical Environment

Except for three months in the winter (mid-November to mid-February), Calcutta is hot and humid, with temperatures of 30° to 35°C. The winter is a pleasant 18° to 20°C; but wind velocity is then usually very low, causing thermal inversion: i.e. the ground is colder than the air above it, so that pollutants do not escape but remain confined to ground level. Hence atmospheric pollution then reaches its peak. During the rains, on the contrary, the city air is clean; but because of the concave shape of Calcutta's surface, polluting effluents cannot disperse easily but cause surface pollution. Had the land sloped towards the river, there would have been easy natural drainage. At the same time, being some distance from the sea, Calcutta lacks the limitless facility for drainage and waste disposal that the sea affords. The river, too, has to flow sluggishly over this distance; on the way, industrial wastes and effluents settle at its bottom to cause serious water pollution. On the positive side, the distance from the sea eliminates sea pollution hazards such as threaten Bombay, Madras etc.

Trees and open spaces maintain the oxygen balance in urban areas. Ideally there should be 100 trees per kilometre; Calcutta has only 21, according to a tree census conducted by the Institute of Ecological Exploration in Calcutta in 1984. Since then, the number may have increased marginally in inner Calcutta owing to many tree-planting programmes; but building and development on the outskirts has undoubtedly lowered the number there. The open space per capita is 20 square feet. In London it is about 250 square feet; in Moscow, 450 today and expected to be 550 by the year 2000. Even the road area in Calcutta is only 6.5 per cent of the total surface area, against 16 per cent in Bombay and 23 per cent in Delhi. Hence pollutants from motor exhausts (as well as from coal fires and other sources) are trapped between the walls, especially during the winter.



The Calcutta Improvement Act of 1911 empowered the Trustees of the CIT to

make provision for the improvement and expansion of Calcutta by opening up congested areas, laying out or altering streets, providing open spaces for purposes of ventilation or recreation, demolishing or constructing buildings, acquiring land for the same purposes...

Seventy-nine years later, the problem is graver, while the solution has not been pursued as the imperative necessity that it is.

On the contrary, the effects of an unfavourable terrain and intense congestion have been exacerbated by the man-made situation on many fronts. For instance, the inner city produces 2,600 metric tons of garbage a day. This is actually less than half of what cities in the industrial world generate: the average there is of 1,800 metric tons per million inhabitants. Calcutta's garbage is taken to some 600 collecting points, and removed thence to the dumping grounds east of the city. But collection does not match accumulation. There is usually a backlog of 10 to 20 per cent, creating a health hazard in the city's humid tropical conditions.

Such shortcomings create what we may call an urban psychological pollution, a fatigue and



depression in the citizens that can preempt the very effort needed to improve their environment, or even blind them to the need for improvement. The transport system provides a clear instance. As the crowds cling to a bus or jostle to board one, the crush, sweat and irritation can easily blind or resign them to more insidious hazards: for Calcutta's transport is a major source of pollution, as in all Indian cities.

Left :
26.1 Trees along
Meghnad Saha Sarani

Right :
26.2 A smoking chula
on the roadside



Over 90 per cent of West Bengal's motor vehicles belong to Calcutta. The number is very low compared to that in western cities; but the pollution coefficient is much higher, owing to the poor state of the vehicles and the use of petrol containing organolead compounds. This has been banned by most developed countries, but is still freely permitted by the Government of India – perhaps so that the developed countries can dispose of their stock.

In 1977-78 Calcutta generated 250 metric tons of air pollutants per day from auto exhausts. Since then the number of motor vehicles has increased 2.5 times, while pollution control measures have been minimal. (Indeed, state-owned buses are among the most notorious offenders.) The age of power cuts and the lighting demands of pavement stalls have also introduced exhaust fumes from thousands of diesel generators, mostly on the streets at man's-height level. All this combines with that traditional pollutant, the coal cooking-fire. Hence, and not only from the crowds, the suffocating, claustrophobic sensation so often felt when walking down a Calcutta street.

The presence of much industry even within inner city limits is another grave source of



26.3 A smoking chimney in an inner-city slum

pollution. The CMC area has 11,516 large and small industrial units; not one of its 100 wards is without some registered unit, leaving aside the moonlighters. Many of these factories produce highly toxic chemicals – for instance, the 2,150 units producing ‘acids, chemicals, paint and varnish’, many of whose emissions are suspected of causing cancer. The Municipal Gazette of 28 November 1974 listed many offensive and polluting trades – metals, pottery, storage of dangerous chemicals such as saltpetre and nitroglycerine – as carried on in 68 of the 100 wards. Most of these factories and stores are located in thickly-populated areas, sometimes actually in a dwelling-house.

In Tangra, there are about 140 tanneries within a small area, discharging 8 to 12 gallons of waste effluents for each kilogram of hide processed. This runs through open drains and fills the whole area with a foul smell. The water sources of the area have sometimes been found to contain over 1000 times the permissible limit (0.05 micrograms per millilitre) of chromium compounds, some of them again suspected of causing cancer.

Not only is there no programme for moving out inner-city factories, even pollution control measures are feeble and perfunctorily enforced. Large units of leading industrial organizations have been found shockingly lax in this regard. And while there is a prohibition on new large industries in the inner-city zone, small unregistered units spring up daily, beyond all control whatsoever.

Air Pollution

Adequate data about Calcutta’s air pollution is not available. Such data as exists, about some common pollutants, bears out the powerful impression of atmospheric ‘dirtiness’. Technically, ‘dirtiness’ is defined as the overall soiling capacity of the air: it indicates the total degree of pollution. The soiling of shirt collars is a common indication. A more quantifiable one is the speed at which a white filter placed in a city street turns black: in Calcutta, it takes only two hours.

Particulate pollution of the air comprises suspended particulate matter (SPM) and dust. The SPM value is a measure of the quality of the ambient air; it is used as a controlling index for some emission regulations. SPM includes all particles that can float or travel freely in the air; it includes smoke as well as smog, the mixture of smoke and fog that envelops Calcutta on winter mornings and evenings. In urban areas today, SPM also includes highly toxic compounds like polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH) and heavy metals – lead, chromium, nickel etc. Some of these are carcinogenic, and the high SPM level aggravates the incidence of respiratory diseases like asthma and bronchitis. It is common knowledge, borne out by medical reports and surveys, that their occurrence is rising steeply in Calcutta. The worst sufferers are children: we are endangering the citizens of the future.

In 1977–78, the WHO measured Calcutta’s SPM concentration as part of its global programme on air quality monitoring, and reported it to be the highest in the world. The accompanying table gives the comparison with major cities round the world.

Atmospheric pollution is at its worst in Calcutta during the winter months. Owing to the inversion of temperature during morning and evening, the pollutants remain stagnant in the air for hours. This favours the creation of photochemical smog, detectable by a burning sensation in the eyes. Studies made in the winter months of 1984, 1985 and 1987 showed highest SPM concentration from 9 to 11 am and 4 to 6 pm: 1,100 micrograms per cubic metre against the WHO norm of 90 micrograms for residential areas.

Another alarming aspect is that 15 to 30 per cent of Calcutta’s SPM contains benzene solu-



ble organic matter (BSOM). 37.55 per cent of this BSOM (i.e., 5 to 11 per cent of the total SPM) consists of polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH), which are highly toxic compounds. A study made in winter 1984 found benzo(a)pyrene, a suspected carcinogen, to be present among the PAHs in very high concentration. Tests show that an amount of benzo(a)pyrene sufficient to induce carcinoma in test animals in a few weeks is absorbed by Calcuttans over fifteen years, against fifty years in Europe. The same study found heavy metals to be present in high concentration in the

TABLE 3 SPM Value of City Commercial Centres in Various Countries 1977

City (commercial centre)	Maximum mean (micrograms per cubic metre)	arithmetical
Calcutta		419.0
Teheran		361.2
Lahore		331.9
Athens		254.7
Prague		159.9
Sydney		91.6
Chicago		85.9
Toronto		69.7
Hong Kong		62.6
Tokyo		54.9
Frankfurt		31.1
London		22.8
Copenhagen		14.9

winter months. Chief among them was lead, specially toxic to children. Sulphur dioxide and oxides of nitrogen also reach high levels in Calcutta's atmosphere in the winter. The spate of bronchial disorders in that season tells its own story.

Noise Pollution

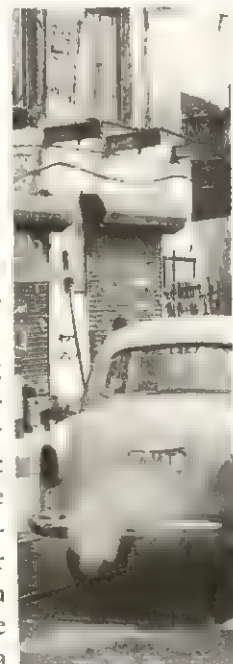
In many countries, noise pollution is considered the most severe of all types of pollution. In the USA alone, over 18 million people are suffering from loss of hearing through exposure to excessive noise. Formerly thought to be part of the aging process, loss of hearing is now commonly attributed to noise pollution. The Indian Council of Medical Research estimated that 10 per cent of the population of Calcutta and Madras, and 9.5 per cent in Delhi, have had their hearing impaired in this way.

The noise tolerance level of the average human being is 60-65 decibels (dB). Recommended levels are 45 dB in residential areas and a maximum of 85 dB in industrial areas without resident population. In Calcutta, the few scattered studies made show the following mean noise levels:

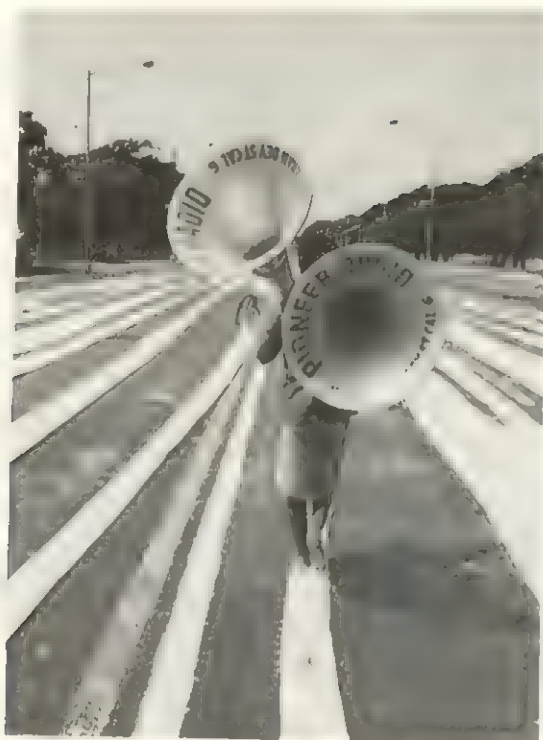
Binay-Badal-Dinesh Bag	: 80-85 dB
Esplanade	: 75-84 dB
Park Street	: 78-81 dB
Gariahat	: 80-82 dB
Shyambazar	: 80-82 dB

Another study puts the average noise level still higher, at 85-90 dB. The biggest single source, except in intensive industrial pockets, is traffic noise. The number of vehicles may be negligible by western standards, but poor maintenance of both roads and vehicles causes great rattle, friction and engine noise, compounded by the constant use of high-intensity horns, although prohibited by law. Street trading adds its quantum of noise, as indeed does the sheer hubbub of pedestrian traffic.

The noise level reaches its highest during festivals – chiefly from hundreds of loudspeakers blaring out popular music, again commonly in excess of the legal volume and duration. At Kali Puja and occasionally other festivals, the noise of crackers can cause severe and immediate damage – general shock, cardiac disorder and hearing loss (the last especially in new-born babies, even leading to brain damage). These dangers are chronic to all Indian cities; a



26.5 Noise pollution :
loud-speakers being
taken to a meeting



metropolis like Calcutta suffers most intensely owing to its sheer numbers.

The basic problem is that Calcutta does not have stringent and comprehensive regulations for noise control. Factories and workshops – for motor repairs, metal cutting, assembling of automobile parts etc. – are fast coming up in residential areas without breaking noise laws, because there are none to break. Most of these factories emit noise in excess of 85 dB. A curious social acceptance of celebratory noise – at festivals, weddings etc. – also impedes official control; but it cannot, of course, prevent the insidious damage to body and mind.

Conclusion

One might fitly, if depressingly, deal with other areas of pollution and insanitary environment in Calcutta. Water pollution has been treated in the article on 'Water Resources and Supply'. There are many other types, mostly shared in common with other Indian cities. The rise in malaria cases is an example. Another eyesore and pollutant is the scattering of *khatal*s or unauthorized cattle sheds. Many *khatal*s have indeed been removed in recent times; but plenty remain, or have simply moved elsewhere within city limits. The banks of Tolly's Nulla, for instance, house many *khatal*s ousted from else-


where. The stream – the original course of the Ganga, a navigation channel and bathing-site within living memory – is now virtually a huge sewer, despite some recent attempts at beautification.

Along the suburban railway line to Babaj, between Tollyganj and Baliganj, is a long straggling shanty-town called Lake Palli. It is four or five kilometres long but only fifty feet wide, along the narrow strip of land beside the railway track. Middle-class houses abut upon it. Twenty-five years ago, these *pukka* houses predominated; today the slum population is much higher. The tracks and adjoining drains serve as their latrine. At evening, thousands of coal fires cloud the air: in winter one's smarting eyes can scarcely see a few feet ahead. A shower of rain turns the ground into a morass. But to the simplest dwellers of this settlement, the shower still comes to cleanse, relieve, exhilarate: the alleys winding through the shanties are filled with scores of children dancing in the rain. Perhaps we may truly call them the children of God.


Yet God's gift of rain cannot by itself cleanse the air these children breathe – or the other, luckier children in the *pukka* houses alongside, and the still more privileged ones in Alipur mansions or Park Street flats. For pollution, unlike other urban evils, cannot be staved off by wealth. One can buy relief from power cuts, crowded buses and squalid hospitals, but one cannot lay on a private supply of air. No man can escape from his environment. That chastening thought might lead us to improve it.

Greater public awareness of environmental issues is the first and most basic requirement. This in turn will press the authorities into taking imperative, long-overdue action. Pollution control measures can yield remarkable benefits, though the long-term solution must lie in dispersal of population away from the inner city. Totally independent centres of growth and employment are unlikely to arise soon; a more feasible compromise might be satellite townships with fast connections to the hub of the Metropolitan District.

These are all practical programmes to engage the attention of planners. But the overwhelming human reality of Calcutta obliges us to see such issues in a wider perspective. Ultimately, the creation of a better environment is inseparable from the quest for prosperity and social justice.



CALCUTTA'S WILDLIFE



Kushal Mookherjee

When Calcutta was born, three hundred years ago, the entire area was dominated by the type of ecosystem that still persists in the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans. The habitat was not too saline: the fresh water brought by the river mitigated the salinity of the water brought in by the tides. Thus the area must have had a remarkable mosaic of vegetation with mangroves along the rivers and water-courses and non-mangroves in the higher and less saline habitats.

This diverse flora must have sustained an equally diverse fauna, as in the Sundarbans today. Among the larger mammals, several species have proved to adapt specially to mangrove habitats: the tiger, fishing cat, rhesus monkey, spotted deer, wild boar and otter. Other mammals of variable adaptation to wetlands or saline habitats also lived in and around Calcutta: the common langur, jackal, Indian fox, striped hyena, various civets and mongooses, the barking deer, Indian hare etc.

Today the mangrove forests have receded far away. Natural trees and forests have been completely replaced by man-made orchards, and even these are being swallowed up by the concrete jungle. Yet with amazing resilience, a variety of wildlife still survives in the tiny patches of 'wilderness' locked within the sprawling urban agglomeration.

Wildlife habitats in and around today's Calcutta are of three broad types: the wetlands; the

suburbs with orchards and crop fields; and the fully built-up city. Let us look at these one by one.

The Wetlands

Of the surviving wetlands – only a fraction of their previous extent – the most important is the Salt Lakes along the eastern fringe of the city. It used to be a large sheet of brackish water connected with the estuarine tidal rivers; today it is more enclosed, less saline. Other important wetlands are the Brace Bridge marshes, the Santragachhi Jhil, the Mathura Jhil near Kancharpara, the Rabindra Sarobar (Dhakuria Lakes) and Subhash Sarobar (Beliaghata Lakes), and the banks and shallows of the River Hugli.

These wetlands still harbour many common resident species of birds, including the little cormorant, little grebe, waterhen, moorhen, bronze-winged jacana, red-wattled lapwing, various ducks, herons and cormorants, and the brahminy kite. More localized residents include the purple heron, night heron, purple moorhen, whiskered tern and baya or weaverbird. But these can be spectacularly outnumbered in winter by flocks of migratory birds. Most numerous is the lesser whistling teal, which breeds in pairs scattered throughout the land but congregates in winter. Other residents and local migrants like the comb duck, the cotton teal and, very rarely, the large whistling

27.1 *The spotted owl*



teal occur alongside the true migrant species.

The best-known haunt of these waterfowl, the large lake inside the Alipore Zoo, attracts alarmingly few migrants today. So do the Salt Lakes, once an internationally famed wildlife spot. Santragachi Jhil still has a good concourse. But many birds which were once plentiful have now disappeared. Their plight is perhaps symbolized by the spectacular Pallas's fishing eagle. Once a common resident predator in the bigger wetlands, it is now a rare bird. Its nesting trees gone, it has resorted to nesting on high-tension electric pylons: the authorities have no alternative but to destroy the nests.

The most important wetland mammals are carnivores. Obviously, they survive in very small numbers if at all. The fishing cat has been pushed to the brink of extinction. The jackal has fared better, being adaptable and partly commensal with man. Otters, surprisingly, survive in isolated patches despite being ruthlessly hunted for their skins.

Of special significance is the marsh mongoose (*Herpestes palustris*), a recently-described species so far obtained only from the Salt Lakes and one other locality in South 24-Parganas District. Though still fairly common in the Salt Lakes, its restricted and dwindling habitat obviously makes it badly vulnerable.

The Suburbs

The term 'suburbs' is being used here to designate the type or habitat around the periphery of the city, or even enclosed within



it, where vegetation still dominates over man-made structures. In some areas extensive crop fields provide open spaces; elsewhere groves of fruit trees, coconut or bamboo form a dense, shady habitat. Here too there has been a drastic reduction of vegetation over the last few decades, and rich habitats like the Narendrapur Wildlife Sanctuary are lamentably few. The suburban towns, which are perhaps marginally better vegetated than the city proper, represent a transitional zone between the latter and the orchards and crop fields.

The suburban habitat shelters most of the common birds of lower Bengal, as well as less common ones like the green pigeon, orange-headed ground thrush, blossom-headed parakeet, hawk-cuckoo, stork-billed kingfisher, crested serpent-eagle and shikra. Still more restricted in occurrence are birds like the emerald dove, Indian pitta, paradise flycatcher, Indian cuckoo and brown fish-owl. In winter many migratory species, including the swallow and various warblers and wagtails, are common in most localities of this type.

Among the mammals, three species of civet and two of mongoose are still to be found here – all of them, indeed, quite commonly, except for the elusive large Indian civet. Jackals too are fairly common, and their weird howling is very

Left :
27.2 The fishing cat

Right :
27.3 The
coppersmith : a common
inner-city bird





27.4 The lake inside the Calcutta Zoo with migratory birds

much a feature of suburban nights. But the Indian fox has been almost exterminated here by the depredations of illegal skin-hunters. The jungle-cat too has been persecuted by poultry-keepers but is still thriving in many localities, while the fishing cat is found at a few restricted spots. Surprisingly, the Indian hare still occurs in many areas, in spite of being relentlessly hunted for its flesh.

The City

Within the city, the vegetation in parks and open spaces – above all the Maidan – and the grounds of the few remaining villas is hopelessly disproportionate to the sprawling built-up area. Though tree-planting has made substantial progress in recent years, and the diversity of tree species is still impressive, this is offset by the felling of trees to make way for buildings and industrial complexes.

Even so, the city harbours a surprising variety of common birds: the pariah kite, blue rock-pigeon, spotted dove, house swift, crimson-breasted barbet or coppersmith, three types of mynas, two of bulbuls and two of sunbirds, the tailor bird and the magpie-robin, as well as the ubiquitous house crow and house sparrow. More restricted, but still fairly com-

mon, are the little cormorant, various herons, kingfishers and woodpeckers, the rose-ringed parakeet, the black-headed oriole, the spotted owl and the white-backed vulture. Yet other species are seen occasionally and may even breed: the darter or snake-bird, ring dove, hawk-cuckoo, green bee-eater, Indian roller, jungle crow, black drongo and jungle babbler among others. There are also some small arboreal migrants seen widely in the winter.

Calcutta city is hardly a habitat for wild mammals, except for small rodents like the Indian mole rat or an insectivore like the house shrew. But the adaptable jackal still survives in the bigger tracts of greenery like the Maidan, Rabindra Sarobar or Tollyganj golf links, resting by day and emerging at night to feed on the refuse dumps. Two species of mongoose are also common in some localities, and the common palm civet or toddy cat survives here and there among old houses and ancient trees.

The drastic change of habitat from wetland to concrete jungle should have banished all wildlife from Calcutta. Yet miraculously, the wild animals have not disappeared, and the bird life in particular is still worthy of note. We can only hope that Calcuttans will have the good sense to protect what little is left of their natural heritage.

27.5 The scaly-bellied green woodpecker



CALCUTTA'S RIVER

Raghab Bandyopadhyay

I

The twin cities, Calcutta and Haora, run their parallel courses. Touching them both, dividing and yet linking them, is the actual wide course of a river. From long before sunrise, this course is touched in turn by a stream of men and women on either bank. As the day wears on, the water grows darker, intenser. How dark can it get? How sullied by the offerings of man?

There were once hordes of men who chanted Sanskrit hymns as they hitched their sacred threads round their ears and plunged into the Ganga, hungry for redemption: today there are only a few. Rich housewives of old Calcutta would be brought here in curtained palanquins and given the holy dip, palanquin and all. The scene is unimaginable today. Neither sahib, nawab nor zamindar sails down the river on his pleasure-barge. Some country-boats laden with straw or bales can still be seen making their way, but their number has declined, as even more drastically has the clutch of ferry-boats.

Bipradas Pipalai in his *Manasamangal Kavya* has left us a vivid picture of the river in the late fifteenth century, two hundred years before Charnock landed at Sutanuti. The river routes, the trading centres, the life of the people on the banks, their arts and industries are all brought into the account of the merchant Chand's voyage: past Katwa, Nadia, Phulia, Tribeni,

Saptagram, Bhatpara, Kankinara, Mulajore, Khardah, Sukhchar, Konnagar – on to Chitpur, Kalikata and Kalighat. The last two names are probably interpolated, but the picture remains valid, coloured by the uncertainty of even a river voyage in those days and the aura surrounding the lives of the rulers, traders, priests and pilgrims who inhabited this flourishing spectrum of towns. The coming of the white traders only increased the alchemic fascination of the river.

Soul-saving apart, the river had two functions, trade and transport. Both have dwindled, and the ghats and jetties along the Strand have crumbled along with them. The old or 'Adi' Ganga down which Chand sailed to the sea has silted up, and the new flow of the Hugli or Bhagirathi now carries the water below Kalikata. If we walk from ghat to ghat along a stretch of deserted bank, we may meditate on the transience of Gangetic civilization: for Calcutta has neither mountain nor sea, only a river. The river linked the city to the land; it brought the white men who founded the city in the first place. But then came the railway, and after that the motor roads. The children of the river began to desert their mother.

The desertion is not evident, for the river-bank is largely over-populous to this day; and some of its denizens are truly children of the river. Eight-year-old Bhaglu has spent his life



at Ahiritola Ghat. He knows the shops there, the gambling-dens, the places where they chant the *Mahabharata*, the burning-ghat at nearby Nimtala; but not once in his life has he seen the interior of the city. His father and grandfather, workers at the Angus Jute Mill, are dead; his family village in Bihar scarcely a name he remembers. His companion Ismail remembers nothing at all. The ghat, its ancient trees and its canopied resting-place are their home, and the river the only guardian of these orphan boys.

It is the wealthy and the mobile classes, the earners and the thinkers, the 'people who matter' but do not matter, who have abandoned the river. The undying common people turn to the river as to everything else in the city that can afford them support to live.

II

It is not my purpose to speak of the Ganga generally as India's holy river; but that aspect of the stream is not absent in Calcutta. As readers of old Bengali literature know, *Gangajal* or 'Ganga water' was once the address that marked a special tie of affection, especially between two women. The river has entered deep into the Bengali language and its speakers' roots. Declared religious or superstitious beliefs may have dwindled. Does anyone bathe in the Ganga today to cure an illness? How many expect seriously to wash away their sins? But the underlying mystique lingers, anchored in the sheer physical compulsion, in a hot country, to drink and bathe continually. Hence as many of the ghats as remain in a usable state are crowded with bathers and water-seekers all day, just as they were three hundred years ago.

Pandit Girishchandra Vidyaratna recalled a scene from his childhood in his autobiography written around 1982.

My mother used to go every day with her daughter-in-law to the river, to fetch two pitchers of water between them. That was our drinking water. After bathing, my wife would come home in her wet sari, as she did not have a change of clothes. In villages like our Rajpur, every woman went to bathe in the Ganga in this way, so that many women of the same age would generally go together.

Even in today's Calcutta, much the same scenes recur daily: a group of women going down to the river and coming back with dripping clothes, or else stretching out a newly-washed sari to dry, held by one of them at either end.



They are most numerous in the hot weather, but some can be seen in all seasons – on Mahatma Gandhi Raod, or around Ahiritola, Nimtala and Bagbazar. Bare-chested old men can be seen at six in the morning, returning from their dip, a bag of hot *jalebis* in hand. Sometimes a holy bull stalks up complacently and draws the pack of sweets into his mouth. Moving on to the river itself, other people can be seen still in the water: some with folded hands upraised, grasping their sacred thread and invoking the river; others next to them bickering, gossiping or exchanging jests; one perhaps imprecating the unknown thief who has absconded with his shoes while he was in the water; while a band of urchins splash around the company.

Lakhs of people bathing at a single ghat:
Some offer clothes, some gold, some seeds, some cows.

This was Mukundaram Chakrabarti's description in the *Chandimangal Kavya* of a scene on the Ganga in the late sixteenth century. We cannot see such crowds every day – if indeed Mukundaram himself ever did. But a gathering of many thousands can be found on the Calcutta Ganga on holy days like Akshay Tiritiya, Mahalaya or Dashahara (Dussehra). Dashahara is said to be the birthday of the Ganga, hence the day that it can remove or obliterate (*hara*) the ten (*dasha*) categories of sin. Fishermen

28.1 Boatmen on the Ganga. Solvyns

worship the river that day, and it is forbidden to cast a net into the water.

Such beliefs survive in happy harmony with modern rationalism and worldly and secular concerns. When the political parties bring hundreds of thousands of supporters into the city for their giant rallies, these visitors from the villages combine political demonstration with sight-seeing and pilgrimage. Huge crowds can be seen at Kalighat and along the Adi Ganga on such days; also at Babu Ghat, Outram Ghat and other ghats near their rallying-ground on the Maidan. At such moments, they are no longer processionists but pilgrim-bathers.

III

From Kashipur in the north to Hastings at the mouth of the Adi Ganga in the south, the river-bank is broken by ghat after ghat, with a corresponding series across the stream on the Haora bank. They are like hands stretching out to the river, invariably broad and gently-

28.2 A ghat priest conducts rituals



sloping, like so many mute symbols of the land's past relations with the river: bathing, trading, travel. The state of most ghats leaves no doubt that these relations are indeed past. But they are not quite dilapidated; they enshrine history, but a living history that is also captured in their names.

There is a lane in Khidirpur called Nazir Lane. Its original name was longer: Nazir Muhammad Ghatmajhi Lane. Once upon a time, in other words, one Nazir Muhammad obtained a contract as *ghatmajhi* on the Ganga. A *ghatmajhi* was not really a *majhi* or boatman but a more exalted functionary. He would arrange for the hire of various types of boats from his *ghat*, engage oarsmen for ferries and porters for loading and unloading. Nazir, indeed, grew prosperous in his trade. Still more exalted were the *mirbahars*, the harbour-masters of Mughal times, whose role is commemorated in the name of Mirbahar Ghat. (There is no ghat named after Nazir Muhammad.)

All sorts of people have had ghats named after them. Many of them, of course, were the benefactors who built the ghats: usually upper-caste names, often from the 'great houses' of old Calcutta. But they include the names of other orders, regions and religions: Huzoorimal a Punjabi Sikh, Kashinath Tandon, another Punjabi, Rustomji Kwasji a Parsi, Joseph Baretto a Portuguese, unknown Englishmen like Jackson, Foreman and 'Ross Bibi' and famous ones like Clive and Outram. There is an Old Fort Ghat and an Old Powder Mill Ghat; a *Ketua* or *Keto* (wooden) Ghat, a *Pathuria* or stone-paved Ghat, and a more sobering *Takta Ghat* or jetty laid with *taktas* (planks), up which shackled prisoners would carry their packs to the ship that was to transport them to the Cellular Jail in the Andamans.

In his survey of 1792-93, Upjohn located forty ghats between Chitpur Bridge Ghat and Chandpal Ghat. Many of them have disappeared with time, and others are in disrepair. A large number remains, forty-two of them maintained by the Port Commissioners. Radharaman Mitra traces eighty-two in all in his book *Kalikata-Darpan*.

This is just about double the number noted by Upjohn; and not all eighty-two are in use. The population of Calcutta has increased some forty-two times in between. The contrast shows the decline in the importance of the city's ghats.

IV

Yet as we have seen, streams of people come daily to the ghats, and a large number live and make a living there. We shall find wrestlers, masseurs, priests and holy men, as well as the ubiquitous bathers, traders and boatmen. Some come here to chat and recreate themselves; others are habitual riverside idlers, down-and-outs, gamblers and drug addicts. Yet others come to listen to hymns, discourses and readings from holy texts. Lovers come here for peace and quiet. And as everywhere in Calcutta, the homeless come to seek shelter.

Even an all-embracing city like Calcutta cannot afford us such a range of types anywhere so much as along the river. A few represent the outgrowths of officialdom: the attendant doctor at the crematorium, for instance. Nimtala or Kashi Mitra Burning Ghat also affords other strange functionaries inured to death: the funeral priest or 'dead man's Brahmin', the funeral photographer who still operates with a black cloth, a hand-held shutter and a magnesium flare at night. And on the outskirts of the crematorium, holy men sit alongside criminals and potential suicides, smoking pipes of *ganja* (marijuana) after a call to Shiva or Kali.

Let us look more closely at a few characters on the river-bank.

Nayan Mirdha sits at Balaram Basu Ghat near Bhabanipur on the Adi Ganga. He is a boatman, but his chief occupation these days is to sit and wait. Once upon a time, each ghat was virtually a small port, humming with business. Even twenty years ago, Calcutta got its building sand from Medinipur, its bricks from Haora and its bamboos from both districts – all by river. The boats would row up the Adi Ganga past Tollyganj and Kudghat to Garia: hence there were hundreds of shops and stores for bamboos and building materials along the stream. Hence too, Nimtala Ghat on the main river came to have large timber stores.

It may cost Rs 60 to transport a thousand bricks by boat; by truck it would cost Rs 100. Yet the traders have turned to trucks, partly for speed and partly owing to the lack of boats. This last factor indicates a vicious circle: for the boatmen that remain, like Nayan Mirdha, have thereby lost all hope of steady custom. Today there are only a few pleasure-trippers, and courting couples who hire a boat less for pleasure than for privacy.



Nayan Mirdha comes from Shyampur Thana in Haora District. The boat belongs to another villager, Hari Das, from whom it has been rented by Bechu Mirdha. Nayan is only a hired oarsman employed by Bechu. He also works at times as a day-labourer. His son has a job in the Batanagar shoe factory. The Ganga, says Nayan, is a dying mother: her children too have grown old and are dying out.

28.3 A rare cargo row-boat on the Ganga today

Akbar Ali of Noorpur has rented his boat directly at forty rupees a day. He must pay this sum to the owner, whether or not he gets any custom. He too relies largely on pleasure-trippers, but also takes occasional passengers from the crew of the big ships at the port. His most frequent customers are again courting couples, often college students playing truant in the afternoon. He confesses to a slight affliction of the conscience. He knows the young people mean no harm; moreover he is himself a Muslim, yet he feels it somewhat sinful to make a living by aiding such indiscretions on the waters of Mother Ganga.

Akbar's father works a ferry-boat further north, between Bali and Dakshineswar. There they need not tout for custom: passengers come regularly, habitually. But there was no work there for Akbar. The big new launches are sweeping away the livelihood of the ferrymen, just as the little boats themselves lurch and reel in the wash of the engine-run monsters.

Naga Baba the sadhu can be found at the

28.4 Fishing
nets and ferry-boats at a
ghat

Telkal (Oil Mill) Ghat on the Haora bank. He has built his own temple there, appropriately named *Joar-Bhata*, 'Ebb and Flow'. He hails from Awadh but only in name: he has lived at the Telkal Ghat for forty-four years – but then he claims to be a hundred years old. He offers puja, takes his holy dips, and spends the rest of his time watching the Ganga. 'What more need one do?' he says. 'Whatever the rest of you are doing is all wrong. Just see how the river flows of its own accord: that's what makes it so beautiful.' He calls the Ganga the river of the world: its air is as holy as its water.

Part of the talk may be the rhetoric of his trade. But there is no doubt that somewhere deep down, it simply expresses an old man's love for the river that flows past his home.

Sanatan Bhatta has spent thirty of his fifty years selling Ganga water from house to house. He is a married man with children: 'The Ganga feeds us,' he says serenely. Perhaps he is impressed with the special virtue of his trade. He raises his folded hands to his forehead and thanks the mother-river.

Thirty-one-year-old Harachandra Panda comes from Cuttack in Orissa. For the last seven years, he has been practising his family calling of priesthood. He goes the round of Hatibagan Market each day, blessing each shop with Ganga water and a flower petal. But his home and chief place of work is Jagannath Ghat, where he is a 'ghat-Brahmin'. He ministers to the holy bathers: his tin trunk has a stock of towels, oil and holy clay from the river-bed. When children come from their dips, he traces patterns on their faces with sandalwood-paste: a moment he specially loves. For the rest, he too gazes at the river like Naga Baba.

A garrulous man, he says he prizes the river not so much for what it gives as for what it takes away. 'The dirt, the stains, the aches – they're all washed away by the river. Think what would happen otherwise.'

But much has been taken from the river too. Perhaps this lends a touch of wistfulness to Harachandra's meditation.

V

Nobody in Calcutta has heard of Kartik Das or Paresb Das of the Malopara (fishermen's quarters) of Atpur, Nimai Adhikari of the Jelepura (fishermen's quarters again) in Halisabar, or Ramnath Arbi of Khejurigram near



Kanthi. But from the start of the monsoons, fishermen from many parts of south Bengal row towards Calcutta for the hilsa season from August to October. Kartik, Paresb, Nimai and Ramnath have a part in this collective identity of their tribe. The archetypal fishermen that they represent were heroes of Samareb Basu's remarkable novel *Ganga*. For the fishermen, indeed, 'Ganga' is a generic term that they apply to all rivers: not all of them operate on the actual stream of that name. Of those who fish near Calcutta, the greatest number come from Nadia District, and some from Hugli, Haora and the 24-Parganas. They fish only in the 'season'. The rest of the year they are farmers or small traders.

The fishermen set out on the fourth day of the moon – so many black specks on the water. They come down various rivers: the Ichhamati, the Rupnarayan, the Raymangal. Some even come from Bangladesh. Each boat appears to be a separate entity; but in fact a number of them, from the same village or region, operate as a team. By an unwritten law, no group encroaches on another's territory. Their number increases day by day till the full moon, which also marks the full tide known as the *kotal*. This is the time when the hilsa comes from the sea to lay its eggs in fresh water.

The hilsa fishermen use many types of nets: the floating or *bhasa*, the fixed or *bandha*, the



upgathered or *guti* and the finger-net or *anguley jal*. A standard practice is to make a kind of 'well' or enclosed area in the water. The catch is taken twice a day when the tide or bore comes up the river.

Hilsa are caught along Calcutta at Khidirpur, Garden Reach, Chandpal Ghat, Kailaghat and Ahiritola Ghat, and across the river near the Botanical Gardens. Traditionally, no tax has been levied on the fishermen since the days of Rani Rasmani. But the catch has dwindled alarmingly in recent years, chiefly owing to pollution of the river. The recent increase in ferry and launch services has also affected fishing. Nabakumar Basu reported that thirty years ago, 2,800 kilograms of hilsa were sold at Khidirpur Ghat. Today, the biggest daily catch that a group can dream of would be four or five fish, with a total weight of not more than 4 kilograms.

VI

Samaresh Basu described the Ganga in this way in his novel about fishermen:

The sky was overcast, the moon hidden by clouds. Its cloud-strained light – not any light from the city – seemed to be gleaming on the ill-defined waters of the river. This was not only the play of light at night-time, but by day as well. And all the aspects of the river are true. The tide comes, the tide recedes. It comes one way and goes back another. The river is caught between the coming and the going. That which was to come has come unseen, that which was to go has moved far away.

Legend has it that the Ganga came to earth to save it from destruction and fill it with life. This faith, anchored in the nation's deepest myths, imperceptibly colours such individual poetic visions of the river as that above. But let us now look at these lines from a CMDA brochure:

Calcutta does not perhaps offer much by way of natural scenery, but the river Ganga, about half a mile wide, flowing between the main city and the town of Howrah, with its ships, barges and boats, always presents a picturesque scene.

The river has lost its wonder in this account. The educated Calcuttan does not admit it into his life; it can at most provide a 'picturesque scene', as no doubt to the promenaders on the gardens by the Strand.

The images of Durga and the other gods and goddesses are immersed in the Ganga after puja



every year. In low water, the straw frames of the clay gods lie rotting in the water like a symbol. The very rhythm of the tides has been shackled by dams and embankments, though these – and the Farakka Barrage in particular – are the only means of ensuring the river's survival. The ferry-launches, again, have introduced a new rhythm of activity; but the water pays the price by taking to its bosom a new burden of oil and smoke.

The Ganga Action Plan is under way, and will no doubt make a difference. Significantly, the eight appeals that its handouts make to the public are all negative except one: 'Help the authorities in preventing pollution.' The other seven are 'Don'ts', prohibitions of existing practices that are customary and often unavoidable to the people who use the Ganga. The only people to whom such bans could make sense are the elite who have lost touch with the river in the first place.

Socially and not just geographically, the Ganga has changed its course. It has been usurped by factories and the effluents they spew into its stream. Its only faithful children remaining are those the city does not want. It is they alone that can save the river. The Bhagirath of legend brought the Ganga to earth. Will a new Bhagirathi rise from Calcutta's masses to give the river a new life?

(Translated from Bengali)

28.5 Pigeons and bathers below the Haora Bridge

EDUCATION IN MODERN CALCUTTA

Sukanta Chaudhuri

Calcuttans insist on their city's primacy in the world of Indian education. In the early decades of this century, most Indians would perhaps have upheld the claim. Since then the picture has grown blurred. Calcutta remains one of the most populous, productive and distinguished centres of academic activity in India. But while it has suffered from grave detraction born of prejudice and disinformation, any claim to total pre-eminence can today be based only on parochialism and nostalgia.

What is still remarkable about Calcutta, setting it apart from nearly all other educational centres in India, is firstly the unusual interaction between academic life and the wider intellectual and artistic life of the city. The former is infused with the latter's vitality, providing a crucial additive to the interaction with political life found virtually everywhere in India. Secondly, and arising out of this, even the confines of academia foster an exceptional amount of disinterested, self-absorbed intellectual activity not linked to formal curricula, research programmes or the hunt for degrees. It is therefore not reflected in official surveys of the education system, but attracts and stimulates visitors even while it sustains the serious local scholar. It may explain the recent remark by an all-India educational administrator that in Calcutta, academic activity seems to thrive in

direct proportion to the apparent disorder of the academic system.

But the latter part of the equation cannot be overlooked. Higher education in Calcutta is jeopardized by shaky administration, lack of funds, dated methods and curricula and the sheer weight of numbers, as well as economic and political factors outside its own sphere. And this overt crisis in higher education reflects a more basic and continuing problem. This is where we must begin.

Primary Education and the Literacy Rate

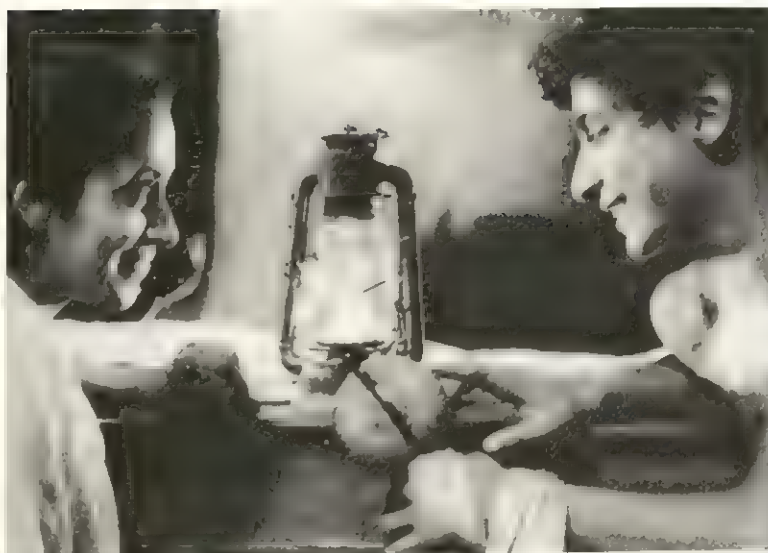
In the run-up to the Tercentenary celebrations, one proposal mooted more than once was for a drive to achieve full literacy among the city's inhabitants, or at least the city's young, by 1991. Such a proposal indicates the entrenched crisis of basic education among Calcutta's poor. The 1981 Census found 26.53 per cent of the city's men and boys to be illiterate, and 36.99 per cent of its women and girls. This was only marginally better than the 31.49 per cent and 41.05 per cent respectively in 1961. Indeed, the achievement of Bengal's educated elite since the early nineteenth century has always obscured the unsatisfactory state, here as elsewhere in India, of general education and indeed basic literacy. In the 1981 Census, only 50.67 per cent of males and 30.25 per cent of females above the



age of five were found to be literate in West Bengal, against 74.03 per cent and 64.48 per cent respectively in Kerala, India's most literate state. The all-India figures, however, were lower still: 46.74 per cent and 24.88 per cent.

No doubt the literacy deficit is chiefly in outlying districts and backward areas: as we have seen, literacy levels in Calcutta are much higher. Contrary to general belief, literacy levels in other metropolitan cities in India are in the same range, as the accompanying table brings out. Calcutta, indeed, is near the upper end of a fairly narrow spectrum. Both Calcutta and West Bengal figures are expected to improve markedly in the next Census, owing to the intensive school-founding and enrolment drive undertaken by the Left Front Government. In the field of female education in particular, West Bengal has recently won all-India acclaim. But this should not blind us to the magnitude of the remaining, and continuing, problem.

Indeed, the literacy shortfall in Calcutta is beyond solution by the local or even state authorities: it is related to Calcutta's unfortunate 'primate' status in the economically and educationally deprived region of eastern India. It attracts an endless stream of migrants from eastern UP, Bihar and Orissa, as well as Bangladesh and of course the more impoverished (and hence illiteracy-prone) segments of West Bengal itself. These people are largely poor unskilled labourers who have had no opportunities of education; their children, if



they come to the city at all, are pressed into employment at the earliest chance and therefore miss out on education as well. Their whole object in coming to the city is to earn, not to learn: indeed, to earn because they are or were unable to learn and have therefore missed out on better prospects elsewhere.

29.1 Apu with his globe, symbol of city learning : from Satyajit Ray's *Aparajita*

In other words, Calcutta is functioning as a great trap or magnet for what we may call upwardly-mobile illiterates; and below these, the illiterate destitutes brought here by the sheer urge for survival. Such 'unenlightened' migrants have always vastly outnumbered the poor *bhadralok* village boys like Bibhutibhushan Banerji's (and Satyajit Ray's) Apu, to whom the city was the fountainhead of education.

The cycle can be ended, if at all, only by feeding more effort and resources into elementary education in the districts of not only West Bengal but even more the neighbouring states. This requires a multi-state – hence effectively national – programme. Alternatively, Calcutta must become the venue for endless toil with adult as well as formal and informal primary education – an impossible financial and administrative burden for the local or state authorities, and in any case making for unhealthy concentration of what should be a basic facility available throughout the land.

What of the facilities currently available in Calcutta? The Calcutta Municipal Corporation runs 317 primary schools, over 25 per cent of them teaching in Hindi and Urdu. Over 38,000 children attended these schools in 1988–89. There are about 200 municipal primary schools in the rest of the Calcutta Metropolitan Dis-

TABLE 1 Literacy Rate in Metropolitan Cities and Urban Agglomerations in India
(MC: Municipal Corporation;
UA: Urban Agglomeration)

Percentage of Literate to Total Population	
Bangalore UA	63.53
Bangalore MC	64.20
Greater Bombay	68.18
Calcutta UA	65.48
Calcutta MC	69.12
Delhi UA	62.74
Delhi MC	63.96
Hyderabad UA	57.79
Hyderabad MC	57.61
Madras UA	67.43
Madras MC	68.40



29.2 A Corporation School in an abandoned church at Kashipur

tract. The Corporation Schools are commonly placed at the bottom of the city's educational hierarchy; but they provide an indispensable service in bringing basic literacy to the city's poorest inhabitants. The total number of primary schools of all sorts is difficult to compute, but is estimated to number some 1,800 within the Corporation area (5.36 schools per 10,000 inhabitants). In the Calcutta Urban Agglomeration, there were 4,346 in 1979. Many of them, of course, were primary sections of larger institutions.

In 1961, 33 per cent of children in the relevant age-group within the Corporation area were not attending primary school as they should have – a higher proportion than in comparable Indian cities. In 1970 the deficit had increased to 43.4 per cent, and lessened only marginally to 42.4 per cent in 1977. This placed inner Calcutta very low among the districts of West Bengal. (The neighbouring districts of Haora, Hugli and 24 Parganas, especially the first two, ranked much higher.) The 1981 Census recorded a total non-attendance rate of 34.4 per cent, though that for girls was, mercifully, only marginally higher (36.7 per cent). The position has no doubt improved further since then, but there is all too much evidence of the deficit that remains.

Given the perturbing rate of non-attendance and drop-outs, informal schools, particularly for child workers, assume importance. A number of these are run by charitable institutions –

usually night schools (of which the Corporation too has a certain number), but also some afternoon schools for child domestic servants. These are laudable and beneficial projects, but their marginality in numerical terms is only too apparent, as is the unsatisfactory nature of the social scene which requires such compromises with a child's basic right to education and welfare.

Any account of education in Calcutta at the secondary or tertiary stage must be seen against this governing reality of the unfinished and seemingly endless task of basic education. In such a situation, the upper educational brackets define themselves by contrast with the state of the uneducated, as exclusive beneficiaries from a profitable asset, a power weapon that (like all power weapons) is effective only if the other side does not possess it too. And the educationally deprived, like all subaltern groups, define their own station in terms of their difference from the educationally privileged, their lack of what the other lot possesses. Education thus functions as a socially divisive force rather than the unifying birthright of all citizens in a democratic state.

The situation is not peculiar to Calcutta: it is the basic contradiction of the education scene all over India. Indeed, the division is less stark in the metropolitan cities, where even the educationally deprived acquire a certain training or conditioning by percolation from their environment. In Calcutta the percolation can be specially intense, and at times assume the two-way character of an interchange, owing to the relatively egalitarian atmosphere and the unusually intimate encounter between different educational groups and economic classes. The power weapon is thus blunted. This makes the illiteracy gap a little less unbridgeable in Calcutta than elsewhere, given the proper resources and organization.

Secondary Education

At the turn of the century, there were three main types of schools in Calcutta: Government schools; missionary and other European-run institutions; and private schools financed and run by Indians, with or without a modicum of government aid. Even today, the school system in Calcutta is fundamentally the same, with some important modifications. The Government schools are still relatively few in number.

Here teaching is conducted in Bengali; and under a decision implemented in 1979, the very study of English as a language begins in Class 6 when the children are eleven. The European schools have been formed into the Anglo-Indian Schools network with their separate Inspectorate and Association of Heads; and in tandem with them there has developed a number of Indian-owned English-medium schools providing a roughly similar pattern of training in what is claimed to be a more indigenized environment. Finally, there are what we may call the Indian-type schools, mostly functioning with massive state aid and under government control. Here the medium of instruction is again Bengali (or some other Indian language) and the teaching of English commences in Class 6.

But while the division remains roughly as before, the relation between these various sectors has changed radically. The last category, though catering to by far the largest number of students, has lost out in prestige

and, it is often said, in efficacy. This charge is not entirely tenable by any means. These schools necessarily turn out large numbers of bright students who later fare well in higher education, particularly science, medicine and technology. But the proportionate rate of academic and professional success is much greater among pupils from the Government and the English-medium schools. Interestingly, this was not the case in colonial times, when the majority of the city's professional and intellectual elite, and nearly all its truly distinguished men, came from vernacular schools, often in the villages.

The English schools are also widely thought to foster a more rigorous discipline and institutional spirit. Hence these schools are facing an inhuman pressure for admission, as are the Government schools. This in turn has spawned an outcrop of new English-medium schools of greatly varying, and sometimes downright dubious, credentials. Between 1970 and 1978, enrolment in Anglo-Indian schools in West Bengal increased by 60 per cent, while total school enrolment went up by only 17 per cent. One Indian-run English high school, South Point, has achieved somewhat daunting recognition in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the world's largest school (12,350 pupils in 1983-84).

Like the deficiency in primary education, this scenario is current all over India, particularly in the cities; but there are some factors special to West Bengal and particularly to Calcutta. The abolition of English at the primary level, and the undeniable decline in its importance at later stages, took place relatively late in West Bengal and generated an unusual amount of controversy. The *de facto* downgrading of English was inevitable, and arguably necessary in the interests of effective mass education. But the protests were inspired by more than the self-interest of the educated elite: genuine fears are still voiced about the consequences for higher education and for contact with the rest of India and the world.

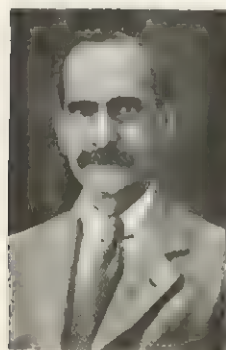
Above all, the network of English schools, both 'Anglo-Indian' and Indian, has been retained (as everywhere in India) and is often patronized by ostensible supporters of vernacular education. The division between 'English' and 'vernacular' schools has taken on a new intensity, with Government schools (which are Bengali-medium) somewhat uneasily strad-



29.3 Reading after work



Above :
29.4 Brajendranath
Sheel



Below :
29.5 D. R.
Bhandarkar

Facing page

Left :
29.6 Sir Ashutosh
Mukherji

From the top
29.7 Rameshchandra
Majumdar

29.8 Gnanachandra
Ghosh

29.9 Shyamaprasad
Mukherji

dling the social divide. The suspect internationalism of the 'brain drain' out of India, about which more later, has also increased the market value of an English education; so has the new consumerism of the affluent classes.

This piece of sociology indicates the amazing importance of the language of instruction in the Indian, especially the urban, education scene. But obviously it is not the only operative factor, and may obscure other vital issues. Another major feature of secondary education in Calcutta, as throughout urban India, is the co-existence – and potential division or competition – of several examining boards with their different courses, methods and approaches. There is the Central Board of Secondary Education, with its nationwide network of schools primarily for the children of federal officials; the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examination, another nationwide network catering to Anglo-Indian schools; and the local state board, in this case the Board of Secondary Education, West Bengal and its upper-level counterpart, the Council for Higher Secondary Education. Somewhat unusually in West Bengal, the state-run Board commands the affiliation even of a number of English-medium schools, and its standards in most subjects, especially science and mathematics, enjoy general confidence. Qualms relate rather to the problems of uniform evaluation and efficient computation posed by mass-scale examinations. (There were over 4.27 lakh candidates at the Madhyamik or Secondary Examination in 1989.)

This may also be the place to mention that unique advantage which students of West Bengal enjoy: selection of entrants to medical and technical institutions by a Joint Entrance Examination. Whatever its incidental shortcomings of execution, this ensures admission on merit and not, as in a number of other states, by capitation fees which enable students to buy their way into, and perhaps through, medical or technical college.

Needless to say, all the above points relate to West Bengal, and sometimes India, as a whole and not Calcutta alone: it is hard to separate one from the other on many issues. One more such general point needs to be made.

Till 1907, the school-leaving examination was called the Entrance, and thereafter till 1951 the Matriculation Examination. Both were conducted by the University, and clearly

viewed school education as a preparation for higher studies. After Independence, a Board of Secondary Education was set up in each state, and the examination renamed the School Final. In 1960 this became the Higher Secondary, with the years of study increased from ten to eleven. Finally from 1976, again following a national guideline, the Madhyamik (Secondary) Examination is being taken after ten years of school, and the Uchcha Madhyamik (Higher Secondary) after another two.

The new nomenclature clearly indicates the new concept of school education as an end in itself, a more egalitarian and popularly-oriented model. But this underlying philosophy has yet to be fully established in practice. In the 1950s and 1960s, if not later, colleges grew proportionately faster than schools. Attempts at providing vocational training after school have repeatedly run into sand; and the person who ends his education at school is widely regarded as a sort of drop-out. Yet the root cause of the higher education spiral is unemployment, a hunt for ever higher qualifications in the hope of winning through to a job. Employment prospects and other economic issues are governing factors in the growth and direction of higher education in the city and the nation. Let us now turn to higher education.

The Growth of the University

Calcutta University was set up in 1857, but it was for long merely an examining body. Undergraduate teaching was carried out in the colleges, as it still is. Postgraduate classes were concentrated at Presidency College, with a few at what was then the Scottish Churches College. A number of professors were appointed directly by the University in 1904. But only in 1917 did the University set up centralized departments of postgraduate study. Postgraduate teaching at Presidency College dwindled to a matter of partial support, chiefly in the sciences; only very recently has the prospect of re-expansion been seriously revived.

The wisdom of such centralization has often been questioned, then and later. It deprived the University of the interaction and healthy competition that a plurality of postgraduate centres would have allowed. More important, given its far-flung jurisdiction at the time and its staggering increase in enrolment subsequently, the postgraduate departments soon fell prey to



extreme pressure of numbers – which has mounted ever since.

But at the time, such problems were obscured by the exhilaration of growth, above all during the Vice-Chancellorship of Sir Ashutosh Mukherji (1906–14, 1921–23). Although Ashutosh was not Vice-Chancellor when postgraduate classes actually began at the University, he was the guiding spirit behind the move. Lawyer, mathematician, bibliophile and man of the world, Ashutosh (1864–1924) gave the University the stamp it has borne ever since. His authoritarian rule was not free of wilfulness and alleged nepotism, providing an unfortunate model for the lesser men who succeeded him. But he organized and expanded the University as never before, drew to it the cream of Indian scholarship, and won for it its highest ever acclaim in India and abroad.

At this time, there came to Calcutta such men as Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), C.V. Raman (1888–1970), D.R. Bhandarkar (1875–1950), Ganesh Prasad (1876–1936) and S.P. Agharkar (1884–1960). A full list of the eminent Bengalis on the University staff would be impossibly long; but few will question a selection comprising such names as Brajendranath Sheel (1864–1938) the philosopher; Satyendranath Basu (1894–1974) and Meghnad Saha (1893–1956), physicists; Nikhilranjan Sen (1894–1963) the mathematician; Gnanachandra Ghosh (1893–1959) the chemist; Sunitikumar

Chatterji (1890–1977) the linguist; Rameshchandra Majumdar (1888–1980) and Hemchandra Raychoudhuri (1892–1957), historians; Binaykumar Sarkar (1887–1949) the economist; or Dineshchandra Sen (1866–1939) the scholar in early Bengali literature. The University staff were ably supported – and not infrequently outpaced – by those in the colleges, Presidency above all: Jagadishchandra Basu (1858–1937) in physics, Praphullachandra Ray (1861–1944) in chemistry, Prashantachandra Mahalanabish (1893–1972) in statistics; Surendranath Dasgupta (1889–1952) in philosophy; Praphullachandra Ghosh (1885–1948) in English literature and Shrikumar Banerji (1892–1970) in both English and Bengali; Kuruvilla Zachariah (1890–1955) in history and Jehangir Coyajee in economics – the last two drawn from Madras and Bombay respectively. Some of these college teachers left to teach at the University, and virtually all of them taught there concurrently.

No educational developments of the time could have stayed clear of the national movement. Ashutosh's independence of spirit showed as much as anywhere in his dealings with the British authorities, even precipitating a crisis in 1907 when he refused to withdraw University recognition of certain schools in East Bengal for political reasons, and another in 1913 over university appointments for three politically suspect persons. Academic and patriotic motives coalesced in his attempts, ever since 1891, to extend the teaching of the vernaculars. These efforts finally bore fruit during his second term as Vice-Chancellor, when postgraduate courses were opened not only in Bengali but in ten other modern Indian languages. But a Professorship in Bengali was set up only in 1926 (and in Sanskrit in 1929), and the B.A. Honours course in Bengali as late as 1938. Ashutosh also presided over the drafting of the new Matriculation regulations, following the recommendation of the Sadler Commission, which allowed teaching and exam-writing in the vernacular. But the scheme was only implemented in 1935, long after his death, being steered through the final stages by his son Shyamaprasad (1901–53), himself Vice-Chancellor from 1934 to 1938.

Most controversially in view of its later consequences, Ashutosh liberalized the Matriculation requirements and thus threw open the gates of higher education to much greater numbers of students than before. The under-





lying intent, to free Western-style education of motivated British control and naturalize it as a liberating force in Indian society, had already appeared in the Indian-run private colleges set up in the previous century: Metropolitan (later Vidyasagar) College in 1872, City College in 1881, Ripon (later Surendranath) College in 1884 and Bangabasi College in 1887. In 1882, two-thirds of the students in Bengal were enrolled at Government colleges; by 1902 the proportion had come down to one-quarter. At that date there were twenty colleges in Calcutta and another twenty-six elsewhere in Bengal (which then included Bihar and Orissa). Ashutosh's University provided a natural extension of such developments

But these aspirations was inseparable from the more mundane one of turning a Western education to its original limited purpose of securing a job in or around the British establishment. The system carried a dangerous potential for turning colleges and universities into 'degree factories'

The danger was realized most fully when the barriers broke after Independence-and-

Partition; but it was sufficiently apparent in earlier times. Praphullachandra Ray summed up the content of many earlier writings in Bengali when he wrote in his English autobiography in 1932 of 'the degree-hunting mania of our young men':

The feverish thirst for an academic hall-mark is the outcome of the ingrained belief of our students, and especially of their guardians, that a university degree is the only passport to a good job under Government, or to a professional career. ... The miserable straits to which the degree-holder has ultimately been reduced need not be dilated upon here.

But many observers did dilate upon them – Englishmen, as might be expected, in a still more acerbic vein. Even a sober critic like C.P. Ilbert told the University Convocation in 1885: 'As collegiate education has become more common, the value of the symbol which denotes it has proportionately fallen.' The Calcutta University Commission (1917-19) under Sir Michael Sadler, with Ashutosh as a member, described in detail the overcrowded classrooms, overworked teachers and lack of facilities in the average college: in one, the waiting-hall at nearby Shealdah Station served as the students' common-room. But unlike the Hunter Commission of 1882, whose recommendations were largely guided by considerations of cost, the Sadler Commission advocated substantially greater government investment in education, for 'Bengal required types of education which would make the individual more productive and enhance the social and economic well-being of the whole people.'

Others, however, thought that the unsatisfied demands created by higher education would only breed 'discontented and disloyal subjects', in James Johnston's words (*Our Educational Policy in India* 1880). These fears seemed justified when the nationalist movement gave rise to student protest from the early years of this century. Indeed, numbers of students left their schools and colleges under Swadeshi influence. Ashutosh opposed such a self-destructive course with his characteristic forcefulness. But a realistic appraisal must conclude that once the first ardour abated, the boycott would have petered out in any case. The 'degree-hunting mania' was too firmly entrenched.

More constructive efforts at an independent, indigenized education system were also made. Rabindranath's experiment at Shantiniketan,



started in 1901, lies outside our purview. In 1902 Satishchandra Mukherji (1865-1948) founded the *Dawn* magazine and an associated society, with a band of young men including Rajendra Prasad and Binaykumar Sarkar. They set up the National Council of Education with Rasbihari Ghosh as President, which in turn founded the Bengal National College and School. The special features of their programme were an emphasis on technical education, which the British were still reluctant to impart to their subjects, and a study of ancient Indian history and culture. All teaching was conducted in Bengali. The lasting result of the experiment was the Bengal Technical Institute, set up near Maniktala but soon moved to what was then the quiet suburban retreat of Jadabpur. Later this became the College of Engineering and Technology and finally, in 1955, Jadabpur University.

Meanwhile, other patriotic and creative-minded Indians were establishing some of the city's (and nation's) earliest research institutes: Dr Mahendralal Sarkar's Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (1876), Jagadishchandra Basu's Bose Institute (1917) and, somewhat later, Prashantachandra Mahalanabish's Indian Statistical Institute (1931). All these have been treated in the article on scientific research; but they must be mentioned here to complete the account of education in Calcutta during this period.

After Independence

Like every other sector of public life in Calcutta, the educational world was thrown into turmoil by the Partition of Bengal that accompanied Independence. Of the flood of refugees, a sizeable and vocal section consisted of the displaced *bhadralok* of East Bengal. Their demand for education was a strident corollary to their demand for jobs.

The higher education network was strained close to breaking point. The existing colleges expanded their classes and consolidated the system of shifts: it became a common practice to have what are officially three colleges operating from the same building, morning, noon and night. Innumerable new colleges were opened. West Bengal inherited 48 colleges in 1947; another 108 were set up by 1967, though the pace slowed somewhat thereafter.

The fortunate colleges were 'government-

sponsored': that is to say, the Government assumed financial responsibility and exercised a measure of control. The greater number came up anyhow, often on a shaky or even shady financial foundation, and paid their staff still smaller pittance than was customary at that time. (The coming of the University Grants Commission first ensured a respectable if irregularly-paid salary to most college teachers in India. In West Bengal, this has been consolidated by the State Government's 'pay packet' scheme, whereby the Government has taken over full responsibility for salaries as for most other items of college funding.)

The students who flocked to such colleges – partly the displaced middle class, partly the new beneficiaries of educational expansion after Independence – were of greatly varying ability, and more or less affected by disorienting social and political forces: above all, the prospect of unemployment. The University Departments of Statistics and Anthropology undertook a survey in 1954 of the living conditions and economic background of Calcutta undergraduates. Among many perturbing discoveries, 33 per cent of students were found to be living below the poverty line, and 84 per cent were undernourished.

A few exceptional institutions may have benefited from the extra influx of good students and liberating social developments, especially the greater freedom afforded to women. Presidency College (which began admitting women undergraduates from 1944) looks back to the 1950s as a 'golden decade', and Jadavpur University was founded under that name in 1955. But most of the established private colleges enlarged their custom to an undeniable detriment of standards. And all institutions began to feel the impact of new student movements untouched by the idealism of the Swadeshi days, though sometimes professing forceful new values and ideologies, mostly allied to Marxism.

It would tax the most patient and impartial analyst to separate the elements of purposeful political agitation from the quest for easy degrees or sheer destructive frustration, in the turmoil that overtook Calcutta's academic world in the 1960s and early 1970s. Such a separation would indeed be pointless, for all these elements were generated by the same milieu. This was also the period of the Paris student 'revolution', severe campus violence in

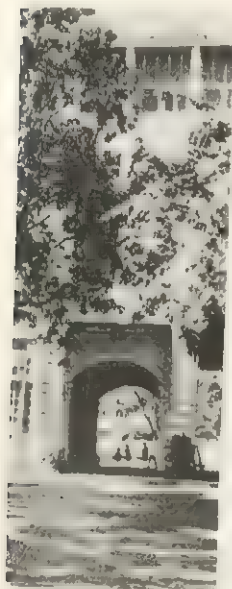


Facing page .
from the top .
29 10 City College

29 11 Kuruwilla
Zachariah

29 12 Jehangir
Coyajee

Above
29 13 Old and new
emblems of Calcutta
University



America, and protest and dissent in student life generally all over the world. But we should be cautious about linking these wider developments to the 'revolt in College Street', which had such patent local socio-economic causes.

The examination schedule of West Bengal's universities has still not recovered fully from that disruption. (Many other Indian universities are caught in similar delays for similar reasons.) More worryingly, that agonizing but passing phase seems to have left an unfair stigma on Calcutta's academic renown for all time. It needs emphatic reiteration that, in a country where no campus is wholly quiet, Calcutta's have been among the most peaceful for well over a decade; and the focal point of campus agitations, such as they are, is no longer among the students but among the staff.

The truly challenging problems facing the University are organizational. The weight of numbers poses a staggering burden on the routine administration. The University is dispersed over a number of sites. The original campus on College Street houses most of the humanities departments, the central library and the university offices. The old University Science College at Rajabazar has been supplemented by an imposing complex in Baliganj that also houses the Law College and some humanities departments, while a few departments, such as Economics, have their quarters elsewhere. But work is proceeding on a large integrated campus at Alipur, though it is likely to be some time before effective large-scale transfer takes place.

There are some seventy colleges in the inner city. In 1987-88, Calcutta University had 162 affiliated colleges in all, as well as the postgraduate departments and 41 specialized institutions. The University conducts about 250 different examinations every year (as against thirty in 1933), of which the Part I Bachelor's degree examination alone had 1,01,173 candidates in 1989. There is also a large body of 'external candidates' for various examinations. Enrolment in a single Calcutta college often exceeds a thousand, and may be two or three times that number, even while certain district colleges have half-empty classrooms.

Such pressure of numbers inevitably exerts a downward pull on standards. This is often, and justly, deplored; but the University has been able to resist the downward trend to a degree for which it is seldom given credit. Standards in

the undergraduate 'pass course' are alarmingly poor everywhere in India. In the Honours and postgraduate courses, Calcutta is still commonly recognized as having some of the highest standards in the country. And, as suggested in my opening remarks, Calcutta still fosters dedicated and disinterested scholarship to a remarkable extent at the very highest levels. With respect to this small minority of students, Calcutta's academic training has won international appreciation to a degree undreamt-of thirty years ago, whatever the personal renown of the greatest scholars and scientists in earlier times. That such recognition all too often activates the 'brain drain' is a separate problem that I shall take up later.

The impediments to wider academic reform, consolidated in terms of statutes and courses, are indeed frighteningly immense. The pressure of numbers and of extraneous social and political forces is aggravated by the weight of the University's own past traditions and practices. Hence the role of other universities and institutions is significant.

Once upon a time, Calcutta University controlled higher studies throughout northern and eastern India, including the entire territories of present-day Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma. This had shrunk drastically before Independence, but still embraced the greater part of eastern India. Since then, several new universities have been set up in Bihar, Orissa and the north-east; and within West Bengal, large areas have been made over to North Bengal University, Bardhaman (Burdwan) University, and most recently Vidyasagar University in Medinipur. Calcutta University now controls only Calcutta city, the districts of 24-Parganas, Haora, Nadia and Murshidabad, and a small part of Hugli district. But there has been no appreciable relief by reducing the jurisdiction: more and more entrants come from within the area, and students from the outer districts still flock to Calcutta for the greater prestige – and hence market value – that its degree is held to command, as well as the employment prospects and social attractions of the city. The district universities have provided only the minimal relief needed to keep Calcutta University's load within functional limits.

Any significant reduction in student levels seems improbable. Economic development in the state may reduce the immediate pressure, for a large number of students join university

courses in the hope of jobs or in default of jobs. (Interestingly, enrolment increased most sharply, by as much as 12 per cent one year, in the period of greatest turmoil and economic uncertainty between 1966 and 1971.) But this reduction may be neutralized or exceeded by the spread of high-school education, turning out a greater number of potential entrants. Diversification of undergraduate teaching by the creation of autonomous colleges, and dispersal of part of the postgraduate teaching to certain colleges as well, are schemes often mooted but yet to be worked out, let alone implemented.

An academic alternative to Calcutta University has emerged in the differently structured, one-campus Jadabpur University in southern Calcutta. (A second campus has just been opened at Bidhan Nagar, but the academic set-up will remain unchanged: Jadabpur trains its own undergraduates and has no affiliated colleges.) The progress of Jadabpur University from a technical institute to a diversified university with flourishing arts and science faculties, including several centres for advanced work in various areas, is perhaps the most significant and heartening development in Calcutta's academic life since Independence. A working co-existence, and sometimes productive interaction, seems to have been achieved at

last with its elder neighbour to the north; and the ablest section of Calcutta's students has undoubtedly profited from the option they now enjoy between two different academic models.

Calcutta has a third university as well, Rabindra Bharati, set up in 1962 in the Thakur family's house at Jorasanko primarily as a centre for music and the fine arts, but controversially extended to the humanities and social sciences as well. Indeed, students in these latter faculties heavily outnumber those in art and music, diverting the original purpose behind the foundation. Kalyani University, set up as an agricultural university, is also located within the Greater Calcutta area; but this too was deprived of its original *raison d'être* with the separation of the agricultural faculties into a new university, the Bidhanchandra Ray Krishi Vishwavidyalaya.

The city has also added to its autonomous institutes of higher education and research. Most of these are scientific, and have been enumerated elsewhere. I may, however, refer to the expansion of the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science, and its acquisition of a campus at Jadabpur, fulfilling Dr Mahendralal Sarkar's dream; and the still more spectacular growth of the Indian Statistical Institute from a

29.14

Jadabpur University



single room in Presidency College to an impressive campus in north Calcutta and major centres in Delhi and Bangalore.

Among the non-scientific institutions, the best-known are undoubtedly the Indian Institute of Management with its campus at Joka, and the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, which has already achieved a distinguished research record from its cramped quarters in the historian Jadunath Sarkar's house in south Calcutta.

All told, however, the quantum of effective research being carried out in Calcutta is not commensurate with the size of the academic population and, particularly, its seemingly endless stock of bright undergraduates. Only a fraction of the latter continue with their careers in the city, and even they may have carried out their most significant research in an interim period elsewhere, usually abroad. This is not explicable in terms of normal academic mobility, for the outflow far exceeds the reverse movement, and the whole process contributes

to the all-India 'brain drain' to the West. Young men and women from the city make up a not inconsiderable part of the faculties of many American universities.

Like many trends that I have noted earlier, this too is common to the nation, not peculiar to Calcutta or West Bengal. But one feature perhaps more marked in Calcutta than elsewhere is the sad obverse of the lively intellectual activity carried out here outside set courses and programmes. Work conducted in such absorbedly independent spirit does not impregnate the institution in which it is undertaken: the official academic framework takes little heed of the achievements that provide its highest justification, and is not improved or modified by them. This lack of institutional support discourages new entrants in turn, and thwarts the total milieu of research.

There have been many studies and proposals to make the educational system more responsive to academic needs and also better adapted to the genuine demands for manpower and social skills. The British Government appointed several committees and commissions for the purpose. After Independence, the University Grants Commission set up a Committee to study Calcutta University in 1970 under Justice Arunkumar Mukherji (and after his death, Professor M.M. Ghani). Its report submitted in 1974 was reinforced, and one may say superseded, by the 1984 report of the Commission for Planning of Higher Education in West Bengal, set up by the state government in 1981 under the chairmanship of Professor Bhabatosh Datta.

The Datta Commission thoroughly investigated and quantified the problems of higher education in the state. It also made elaborate proposals – totalling no fewer than 228 – for rationalization of resources, a graded network of colleges, the reform of educational administration, general improvement of standards and enhancement of the academic atmosphere. These proposals have not been implemented: indeed, they have not been widely circulated or discussed. Yet only through this or some analogous scheme of reform can the body and the soul of Calcutta's academic system be brought together.

When that happens, the city's overflowing intellectual resources will reach their highest fulfilment through self-generating growth within the city itself.

29.15

The Ashutosh building,
Calcutta University





PRESIDENCY COLLEGE



Sukanta Chaudhuri

Calcutta's Presidency College is the oldest Western-type centre of higher learning in Asia. Under its original name of Hindu College, it was set up on 20 January 1817 by a Committee of 'Anglicists' – men who thought that the youth of India should be trained in the new Western learning rather than traditional oriental disciplines. The Committee was headed by Sir Edward Hyde East, with Joseph Baretto as Treasurer and Baidyanath Mukherji as Secretary. Among the chief donors and patrons were Maharaja Tejchand Bahadur of Bardhaman, Gopimohan Thakur of Pathuriaghata and Raja Radhakanta Deb. Above all, the new venture was vitalized by two outstanding educational thinkers and pioneers, Raja Rammohan Ray and David Hare.

The number of pupils rose from twenty to sixty-nine within three months. By 1839 there were 539 students in the Senior School and 372 in the Junior. The latter was subsequently separated as Hindu School. It retains that name to this day, but is now formally attached to Sanskrit College.

Hindu College began life in a rented house at Garanahata. It moved in 1824 to a wing of the new Sanskrit College building in what was then called Pataldanga, and gradually took over more and more of the premises. The College historian remarks: 'Obviously the time spirit was with the Baboos and not with the Pundits.' But a separate building for the College was

opened only in 1874.

The 'time spirit' ensured that Hindu College flourished. The job-hunting tendency of that spirit brought streams of pupils aspiring to Babudom, while intellectual and patriotic ambition made the College the cradle of new thought and social change. This was most flamboyantly evinced in the 'Young Bengal' movement spearheaded by the fiery young teacher of English, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31). But much more fundamentally, the contemporary British pattern of studies, with its insidious humanist bias now conveyed through English instead of Greek and Latin, was instilled into an entire class. This carried obvious colonial assumptions, but also a rarer potential for subverting those assumptions.

The colonial assumptions naturally came to prevail after 1855, when the College was brought under direct government authority as the college of the Bengal Presidency. For the next hundred years and more, Presidency College marked the path to high professional success, especially in government service. Other, mostly private or missionary colleges sometimes achieved comparable, and occasionally superior, academic distinction; but Presidency retained its exclusiveness, reinforced by what in those days were high tuition fees. Only in the 1960s was it driven home how this exclusiveness had rankled in the academic community and society at large.

30.1 The College emblem





From the top
30.2 Presidency
College

30.3 Sushobhan
Sarkar

30.4 Taraknath Sen

Yet at a deeper level, the academic and corporate life of the College had fired the finest aspirations of the age. Direct involvement in the freedom struggle, barring the occasional emotive strike or demonstration, was limited to a few celebrated incidents like Subhashchandra Basu's assault on Professor E.F. Oaten for his anti-Indian remarks. But more importantly, the academic activity implied a sustained idealism with patriotic overtones, perhaps most clearly marked in the thought and work of Praphullachandra Ray, Professor of Chemistry, or Prashantachandra Mahalanabish, Professor of Physics and father of statistical studies in India.

Through the early decades of this century, an unusual number of outstanding teachers, comparable to any faculty in the world, contributed to a major revival of the Indian intellect: Jagadishchandra Basu in Physics, Kuruvilla Zachariah and Hemchandra Raychoudhuri in History, Praphullachandra Ghosh in English, Surendranath Dasgupta in Philosophy, Sir Jehangir Coyajee and Umeshchandra Ghoshal in Economics, Hemchandra Dasgupta in Geology and Debendranath Mallik in Mathematics among others. The line was continued after Independence by teachers (to name only the dead) like Taraknath Sen in English and Sushobhan Sarkar in History. An unfortunate distaste for publication has deprived some of these stalwarts of lasting eminence; but the academic world of Calcutta can testify to the living tradition of scholarship they founded.

The 1950s, like the 1930s, are widely regarded as a 'golden decade' in the College's history. This very success made Presidency a

prime symbolic target of the protest movements born in the 1960s against the social anomalies and functional ineptitude of the education system. The College also became a cradle of such movements, spawning the 'revolt in College Street' that was drawn into the vortex of Naxalite activity. The 1960s and early 1970s were marked by frequent closures, violence, and painful compromises in college administration and corporate life – but remarkably, not in academic demands. When the dust cleared, Presidency proved to have retained the academic moorings that its pre-Independence rivals had largely lost.

This seems due to a unique circumstance. Perhaps alone among Indian colleges (as opposed to universities), Presidency College has always drawn its strength from a tradition of higher learning and research beyond the need of undergraduate courses or basic 'training for the young'. Upto 1917, the College was entrusted with most of the postgraduate teaching at the University. When the University opened its own postgraduate departments, the College lost this prerogative, retaining only the hollow title of 'Constituent College'.

The loss has rankled; hence the long-standing demand for autonomous status or at least for the right to full-scale postgraduate teaching. But the academic activity has continued, though unevenly over time and as between departments. The opening of the Baker Laboratories in 1913 symbolized that tradition. A major new block has since been opened, and another is under construction. Most of the science departments have distinguished research records; and uniquely for an Indian college, two departments – Economics and Geology – have formal centres for advanced work. Singular too by college standards, not only in India but internationally, is the library of some 1.7 lakh books and journals.

Today Calcutta's Presidency College is perhaps the only college in India with a measure of international academic recognition, though it holds somewhat precariously to this vantage-point. Locally, the College is facing a crisis of identity. Its status *vis-à-vis* both the University and the Government provides a running debate in Calcutta academic circles. The course of that debate is a telling commentary on higher education strategies in West Bengal and India.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CALCUTTA

Partha Ghose

In Volume I, I described the early stages of scientific education in Calcutta. The fruits of this training became apparent in the late nineteenth century, when Calcutta could boast of an alert community of local Indian scientists. They now began to undertake original research and set up their own institutions for scientific study.

The Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science

The pioneer in this field was the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (IACS), set up in January 1876 by Dr Mahendralal Sarkar (1833–1904), a physician of rare vision. Originally located at 210 Boubazar Street (now B. B. Ganguli Street), it was the first centre of modern scientific research in India, fully funded by Indians.

Sarkar graduated from the Calcutta Medical College and became an M.D. But later he was converted to homoeopathy, much to the embarrassment and disapproval of his European teachers and colleagues on the Bengal Chapter of the British Medical Association. In order to establish the superiority of the homoeopathic system, he started his own journal, the *Calcutta Journal of Medicine*. In its August 1869 issue, Sarkar expressed the 'desirability of a national institution for the cultivation of sciences by the natives of India' on the model

of the Royal Institution and the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

Sarkar saw the IACS as an instrument to achieve genuine independence, and sought solely Indian funds and support. In spite of support from stalwarts like Bankimchandra Chatterji and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, he failed to raise sufficient funds for full-time professorships to carry out fundamental research. However, some distinguished experts like Jagadishchandra Basu and Ashutosh Mukherji volunteered to deliver courses which attracted students like Praphullachandra Ray. These courses were highly successful, and continued until regular science courses were started in the undergraduate colleges affiliated to Calcutta University.

Sarkar died a frustrated man. 'I have wasted a life,' he lamented in his report to the 25th Annual Meeting of the IACS on 4 September 1902. But his efforts were truly not in vain. When C.V. Raman arrived in Calcutta in 1907, he found in the IACS an institution with the right kind of structure waiting for him.

The University College of Science and Technology

The second centre of modern scientific research, and the first institution in India to offer postgraduate courses in mathematics and science, was Calcutta University. Its College of

31.1 Mahendralal
Sarkar





Above :
31.2 The University
College of Science and
Technology at
Rajabazar

Below :
31.3 Jagadishchandra
Basu

Science and Technology was set up by Sir Ashutosh Mukherji (1864-1924), himself a gifted mathematician, a Judge of the Calcutta High Court and Vice-Chancellor of the University (1906-14, 1921-23).

Ashutosh succeeded in raising sufficient funds from eminent Bengali compatriots, notably Sir Taraknath Palit (1831-1914) and Sir Rasbihari Ghosh (1845-1921), to endow the first professorial chairs in the University reserved for qualified Indian scientists. Debendramohan Basu (1885-1975) was appointed the first Ghosh Professor of Physics in 1914 and C. V. Raman the first Palit Professor of Physics in 1917 – against much opposition from Sir Maurice Gwyer, who insisted that the incumbents should have advanced training from abroad, as stipulated in the endowments. The Palit Professorship in Chemistry went to Praphullachandra Ray in 1916. Shishirkumar Mitra, Gnanachandra Ghosh (1898-1959), Meghnad Saha and Satyaendranath Basu were appointed as lecturers. Thus began a glorious period of scientific research in India, leading to the discovery of the Bose-Einstein statistics, the Saha ionization equation and the Raman Effect.

The National Council of Education

Of very different origin was the National Council of Education, which came into existence during the turbulent national upsurge of 1905-1906. It was inspired by the need for self-reliance in modern technical education in India. This urge found expression in an engineering college with the first department of

chemical engineering in India. That was the beginning of what is today Jadabpur University.

The Indian Institute of Chemical Biology

Another centre of excellence in scientific research was started by a few patriotic Indians in 1935 at 41 Dharmatala Street. It was then known as the Indian Institute for Medical Research, and the Pasteur Clinical Laboratory, among others, was attached to it. Its charter was 'to carry on research in the biological sciences in both their basic and applied aspects'.

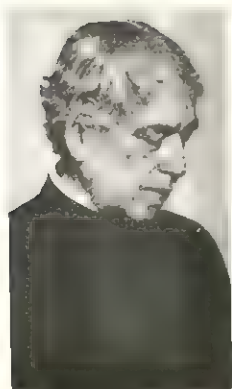
Had it not been for a generous donation of Rs 5,000 from Acharya Praphullachandra Ray in its formative years, the Institute might not have survived. After Independence, the personal interest taken by Jawaharlal Nehru ensured that the Institute started functioning under the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research from April 1956. It is currently situated in Jadabpur and is known as the Indian Institute of Chemical Biology.

One of its most notable contributions has been the comprehensive investigation of the biochemistry of leishmanial parasites, providing a rational basis for the chemotherapy of protozoal diseases and the development of the well-known technique of bacteriophage typing for the precise identification of cholera vibrios and the epidemiological study of cholera. Currently, the major areas of research include biochemical engineering, enzyme engineering, medicinal chemistry, experimental medicine and emerging areas in biological research.

The Calcutta Pioneers: Jagadishchandra Basu

The first Indian scientist of international repute was Jagadishchandra Basu (1858-1937). After an education at St. Xavier's College in Calcutta followed by Cambridge and London Universities, he became the first Indian Professor of Physics at Presidency College – at two-thirds the salary of British professors. He refused to accept any salary, but continued to teach until the Government yielded. In 1917, after his retirement, he became the founder-director of the Bose Institute, on the model of the Royal Institution. He was knighted the same year, and elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1920.

Jagadishchandra began his research work when he was well in his thirties, in the face of callous indifference. Following Hertz's discov-



ery of electromagnetic waves, Basu became interested in the generation, reception and optical properties of these radiations in the unexplored range from 5 mm to 1 cm, the so-called microwaves. He experimented with the receiving properties of semi-conducting materials and worked on photoconductivity. In 1895 he gave a public lecture in the Town Hall in Calcutta during which he demonstrated for the first time the wireless transmission of microwave signals across solid walls. This made him famous overnight, and the Bengal Government sent him on a nine-month tour of Europe. In December 1896 he repeated his demonstration at the Royal Institution in London before an audience that included Lord Kelvin, one full year before Marconi's celebrated demonstrations of wireless transmission of radio signals of much longer wavelengths that were commercially exploited. Basu filed a patent in the USA but let it lapse.

Gradually, Basu became absorbed by the similar responses of organic and inert matter to centimetre-wavelength radiation. His poetic and philosophic bent of mind was kindled by 'the watching of a roadside weed in Calcutta that turned the entire trend of my thought from the study of the inorganic to that of organic life'. He devised ingenious instruments to magnify and record extremely small movements in plants. He was one of the first biophysicists.

Praphullachandra Ray

International fame came next to Praphullachandra Ray (1861-1944), student of Calcutta's Metropolitan College and Edinburgh University. He became Lecturer in Chemistry at Presidency College in 1889 where the Principal, Sir Alexander Pedler, a distinguished chemist, encouraged him to build up a good chemistry laboratory. While looking for the missing elements in the Periodic Table, he managed to precipitate crystals of mercurous nitrite, a form in which the compound had been regarded as unstable. Over the next few years, he carried out a systematic study of mercury salts and a variety of nitrites with the help of his students. In 1916 Sir Ashutosh invited him to become the first Palit Professor of Chemistry at the University College of Science, where he taught for two decades. He was knighted in 1919.

Ray was not content with academic research and teaching. He clearly saw the importance of



industries in the country's development and laid the foundations for a chemical industry in India. With a handful of former students, he started the Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works Limited in 1901. They also established the Bengal Pottery Works, the Calcutta Soap Works, the Bengal Enamel Works and the Bengal Canning and Condiment Works. He donated large sums of money earned from these industrial ventures to the workers; as scholarships and stipends to students; and as grants to laboratories and scientific organizations. Inspired by his patriotic zeal, he also wrote the first authentic history of ancient Indian science, the *History of Hindu Chemistry*.

C. V. Raman

The first Indian scientist to win the Nobel Prize was Chandrasekhara Venkata Raman (1888-1970). A native of Madras, he failed to find a suitable scientific job there and joined the Indian Finance Department in 1907. He was posted to Calcutta. Soon after his arrival there, he discovered Sarkar's Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science. He began to do his research here before and after office hours until in 1917 Sir Ashutosh appointed him to the Palit Professorship in Physics at the new University College of Science.

Raman's initial research was focused on acoustics and musical instruments, and led to his election as Fellow of the Royal Society in 1924. It was during a trip to England in 1921 that he was fascinated by the blue colour of the Mediterranean. With a very simple experiment he convinced himself that the blue of the sea



Above :
31.4 C. V. Raman
with Raman Effect
apparatus

Below:
31.5 Asima Chatterji,
eminent chemist



was due not only to the reflection of the sky, as proposed by Lord Rayleigh, but mainly to the scattering of light by water molecules. On his return to Calcutta he began a systematic study of the scattering of light by different liquids, culminating in the discovery of a totally new kind of radiation predicted by the quantum theory and named after him. These Raman radiations carry vital information about the internal structure of the scattering molecules, and have proved to be of immense importance in studying molecular structure.

Raman was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1930. He became the Honorary Secretary of the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science in 1919, and converted it into the principal research wing of the University College of Science. In 1939, however, he left Calcutta to join the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore.

Satyendranath Basu

Two other outstanding Calcutta scientists were Satyendranath Basu and Meghnad Saha, born within three months of each other and both educated at Presidency College. Shortly after Einstein's relativity theory received dramatic confirmation in 1919, Basu (1894-1974) and his classmate Saha (1893-1956) prepared an English translation of Einstein's papers which was published by the University of Calcutta. In 1921 Basu left for Dhaka, where in 1924 he gave a new theoretical derivation of Planck's famous radiation law (which ushered in the quantum theory) without any reference to the classical electromagnetic theory. In this paper, translated into German by Einstein himself and published in the *Zeitschrift für Physik*, Basu introduced a new form of statistics which Einstein successfully extended to material atoms. 'Bose Statistics' forms one of the cornerstones of modern quantum theory. Particles which follow Basu's quantum statistics have been named 'bosons'.

Basu returned to Calcutta in 1945 as Khaira Professor of Physics at the University, where he developed a laboratory for X-ray crystallography and thermoluminescence studies and pioneered a powerful scanning method of recording the weak spectra of alkali halides. In the early 1950s he became interested in Einstein's unified field theory, on which he published some fundamental papers in French. He founded the Bangiya Bignan Parishad (Bengal

Science Association) in 1948 for the cultivation of a scientific culture among common people through the medium of the mother tongue. Rabindranath dedicated his book on science, *Bishwa-Parichay*, to Satyendranath. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1958.

Meghnad Saha

Saha's most celebrated work was done in Calcutta. It led to his theory of high temperature ionization of atoms and its application to stellar atmospheres. His paper provided for the first time a straightforward interpretation of the different classes of stellar spectra in terms of the physical conditions, like temperature and pressure, prevailing in the stellar atmospheres. It thus acquired fundamental importance for all future work in astrophysics.

In 1919, the Premchand Raychand Scholarship took Saha to Europe for about two years. He spent five months in Imperial College, London, where he developed his theory further with the help of Professor A. Fowler. In November 1921 Saha returned to Calcutta as Khaira Professor of Physics, a new chair created from the endowment of Kumar Guruprasad Singh of Khaira. He left for Allahabad in 1923, to return in 1938 as Palit Professor of Physics. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1927 at the age of thirty-four.

Saha took keen interest in the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science, and became its first full-time director in 1952. He also established what is now known as the Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics in 1948 and installed a 38-inch cyclotron or atom smasher, the first of its kind outside America and Europe.

U. N. Brahmachari

A medical contribution of immense benefit was made by Upendranath (U.N.) Brahmachari (1875-1946). Originally a student of mathematics and chemistry, he joined the Campbell Medical School, Calcutta in 1905. Here, in a small laboratory, he worked from 1915 on a cure for kala-azar, a dreaded killer in Bengal and Assam. The traditional treatment by antimony (*stibium* in Latin) was long, tedious and painful, and therefore impracticable. In 1920, Brahmachari discovered an organic compound of antimony which he called *Urea Stibamine*. It had no painful effects, and was administered to patients at the Campbell Medical School Hos-

31.6 Satyendranath Basu

31.7 U.N. Brahmachari

pital and the Calcutta Medical College Hospital with great success. It was used on an experimental basis in Assam in 1923 and on a mass scale from 1928. By 1933 about 3.25 lakh lives had been saved in Assam alone. The medicine has also been used successfully in Greece, France and China; but contrary to popular belief, it was never patented.

To Brahmachari also goes the credit for establishing the first Blood Bank in India and the second of its kind in the world at Calcutta in September 1939.

Girindrashekhhar Basu

Girindrashekhhar Basu (1887-1953) was an outstanding applied psychologist of great originality who developed his own methods and theories, although in line with those of Freud. The main difference lay in the concept of the 'repressed'. Basu's view is well-known as the 'theory of opposite wish'. Although Freud did not fully accept this view, he admitted the importance of extensive tests to verify it.

Basu obtained his D.Sc. degree from Calcutta University in 1921, and started treating mental patients from the same year. It was at this time too that he corresponded with Freud. He founded the Indian Branch of the International Society for Psycho-analysis in 1922 at his own house at 14 Parshibagan Lane. In 1940 he established a three-bed mental hospital in a house donated by his brother, the eminent writer (and able scientist) Rajshekhhar Basu. This was the beginning of the famous Lumbini Park mental home, which grew to have 175 beds and an outdoor clinic.

Girindrashekhhar wrote a number of popular but authoritative articles on psychoanalysis and devoted considerable time and effort to developing the technical terminology of psychology in Bengali. His Bengali monograph *Swapna* ('Dreams'), profusely illustrated with his own case histories, is still considered to be a masterpiece.

Basu also experimented with different modes of treating mental patients. He wrote an interesting analysis in Bengali of Indian mythological literature, *Puran-Prabesh*, which remains a source-book for historians to this day.

P. C. Mahalanabish

The Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), established in 1931 in Calcutta, had its origin in the

Statistical Laboratory set up by Prashantachandra Mahalanabish (1893-1972) in his office when he was Professor of Physics at Presidency College, Calcutta. Mahalanabish and his students – among them Rajchandra Basu (1901-), Samarendranath Ray and C. R. Rao – made major contributions to the theory and methods of statistics as well as its application to other disciplines. The most notable are Mahalanabish's D^2 statistic and R. C. Basu's work on the Design of Experiments and Combinatorics. With the active cooperation of R. A. Fisher, the father of modern statistics, and J.B.S. Haldane, who joined the Institute in 1957, the ISI began to undertake research in several natural and social sciences with the hope that collaboration under the same roof would foster the mutual development of statistics and these disciplines. The drafting of India's Second Five-Year Plan was entrusted by Nehru to Mahalanabish and his Institute.

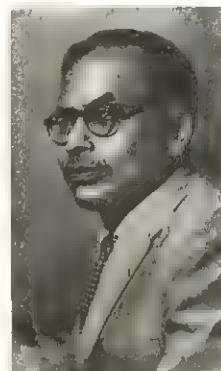
Shishirkumar Mitra

Shishirkumar Mitra (1890-1963) was another Calcutta stalwart who pioneered radio research in India and became an authority on ionospheric problems. As Khaira Professor of Physics, he established a wireless laboratory and installed elaborate equipment for the study of atmospherics. He also constructed a radio transmitting station in the Khaira Laboratory which used to broadcast regular programmes with the call sign 2CZ. It became the training ground in electronic techniques for many of his students. In 1948 he established a separate Department of Radiophysics and Electronics in the University College of Science and Technology, and started a comprehensive M.Sc. (Tech) course. He also established an ionosphere field station at Haringhata, 30 miles north of Calcutta.

Mitra's chief discovery was of new data on the various layers of the ionosphere under Indian conditions by using the pulse technique, and in definitively establishing the existence of a new layer (the D layer) first reported by Appleton in 1928. His treatise *The Upper Atmosphere* became an indispensable reference book on atmospheric research.

Debendramohan Basu

Notable work was also done by Jagadishchandra's nephew Debendramohan Basu (1885-1975), the first Ghosh Professor of Physics and



From the top
31.8 Meghnad Saha

31.9 Prashanta
Mahalanabish

31.10 Shishirkumar
Mitra



From the top :
31.11 The Institute of
Jute Technology

31.12 Debendramohan
Basu

later Director of the Bose Institute. He installed Calcutta's first Wilson cloud chamber (an instrument for recording the tracks of charged particles) and initiated work on the measurement of particle masses using nuclear emulsion techniques. He also made an important contribution to the knowledge of paramagnetic properties of compounds of the transitional group of elements.

I have space only to record the names of other notable Calcutta scientists: chemists like Praphullachandra Mitra (1882-1957), Gnanendranath Mukherji (1893-1983), Priyadarajan Ray (1888-1982), Bhupendranath Ghosh (1900-89), Sir Gnanchandra Ghosh (1893-1959) and Nilratan Dhar (1892-1986); applied physicists like Phanindranath Ghosh (1884-1946) and Purnachandra Mahanti (1903-56); Ganesh Prasad (1876-1936) the mathematician; Bireschandra Guha (1904-62) the biochemist;

Nikhilranjan Sen (1894-1963) the applied mathematician; and Shankar Purushottam Agharkar (1884-1960) the botanist.

Conclusion

Until 1947 Calcutta was undoubtedly the centre of science and technology in India. Independence brought a perceptible change to this promising beginning, a change that needs to be analysed and understood. Calcutta is no longer the pre-eminent centre of science in India. Nevertheless, it still has the largest number of scientific and technological institutions in the country, and tradition continues to produce individual scientists and technologists of outstanding calibre.

Apart from the institutes already mentioned, the following deserve record: the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, the Central Glass and Ceramics Research Institute, the National Institute of Cholera and Enteric Diseases, the Central Inland Capture Fisheries Research Institute at Barrackpur, the Calcutta School of Tropical Medicine, the Chittaranjan National Cancer Research Centre, the Cancer Centre Welfare Home at Thakurpukur, the National Council of Science Museums, the Birla Industrial and Technological Museum, the National Institute for the Orthopaedically Handicapped, the Central Drugs Laboratory, the National Atlas Organization, the Indian Jute Industries Research Association and the Jute Technological Research Laboratories. Two other research centres of national importance have been set up in the city very recently: the Variable Energy Cyclotron Centre of the Bhaba Atomic Research Centre, and the Satyendranath Bose National Centre for Basic Sciences, both in Bidhan Nagar.

With so many centres of excellence and so many talents, Calcutta still has abundant potential to regain the undisputed pre-eminence it enjoyed in Indian science till a generation ago.



THE LIBRARIES OF CALCUTTA



Ramkrishna Bhattacharya

Calcutta today is beehived with libraries. There are two libraries of national importance (or three, if one counts the Central Reference Library, besides the National Library and the Asiatic Society Library); more than fifty commercial, departmental, institutional and specialized libraries; and nearly three hundred public-cum-subscription libraries. Then there are the State Central Library, the Calcutta Metropolitan Library (which is treated as the District Library of Calcutta), and libraries in all recognized schools, polytechnics, colleges and universities – not to mention hundreds of office libraries, office recreation-club libraries and other libraries of limited readership.

Some libraries are moribund, others thriving. Almost all subscription libraries suffer from chronic lack of funds and space. But they have been dogged by such problems ever since their foundation. The fact remains that if we walk at leisure through any ward of Calcutta, we cannot fail to notice at least one library, however small or dilapidated, standing among the ration shops, general stores, laundries and so forth.

The 'pre-history' of Calcutta's libraries goes back to 1698. The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) is said to have had a library of its own. The Reverend Benjamin Adams came to Calcutta with a large number of books and enriched its collection. It was the SPCK again which started the first circulating library in 1709.

With the foundation of the Calcutta Madrasa by Warren Hastings in 1781, a sizeable number of Arabic and Persian manuscripts were collected and deposited here and in allied institutions. The Asiatic Society (established in 1784) always had a library – first in the Grand Jury Room of the Supreme Court, and from 1804 at its own premises at no 1 Park Street. The printed books and manuscripts of the Fort William College Library were later transferred to the Asiatic Society, along with the Government collection of manuscripts. A part of Tipu Sultan's personal library was also donated to the Society's collection, which numbered 91,918 books in 1985. Libraries were also set up in Hindu College (1817: later Presidency College), Sanskrit College (1824), the General Assembly's Institution (1830: now Scottish Church College), St Xavier's College (1835, re-founded 1860) and Loreto House (1840). The first two in particular are today among the richest collections in the city. Presidency College has some 1.7 lakh books and journals, including a large number of rare eighteenth- and nineteenth-century items, as well as a rich store of old educational records and publications. The chief glory of the Sanskrit College Library is its priceless collection of manuscripts.

Older than any of these, however, is the Carey Library at Shrirampur (Serampore) College, a little outside Calcutta proper. William Carey and others set up this Baptist Mission at



Shrirampur in 1800. The library is primarily theological, but includes an immensely rich collection of works relating to India; the historic publications undertaken by Carey and his colleagues in the early days of publishing in Bengali; and, by Indian standards, a surprising number of old European works in several languages, many of them from the seventeenth or even sixteenth century.

The National Library had its humble beginning as a public library at Metcalfe Hall. In the 1820s Englishmen in Calcutta had set up a kind of shareholders' library whose shares were bought and sold. This led to the foundation of the Calcutta Public Library in 1835. This in turn was taken over by the Government and annexed to the Imperial Library established in 1903. After Independence, the Library was moved to the old Lieutenant-Governor's palace at Belvedere in Alipur, where a towering annexe and other buildings have been added to house it and its sister collection, the Central Reference Library. The old premises of the Imperial Library at Esplanade house the newspaper collection. Today the National Library has 18 lakh books, subscribes to 19,144 journals and caters to a readership of 93,000.

The School Book Society (1817) provided a great impetus to the foundation of public libraries. The 'Young Bengal' generation (who sometimes even designated themselves 'Young Calcutta') were very enthusiastic about both acquisition and propagation of general knowledge. They had a circulating library which was supervised by Ramgopal Ghosh and Ramtanu Lahiri. Pyarichand Mitra, it may be mentioned, was the first Assistant Librarian of the Calcutta Public Library.

The rise of nationalist feeling and an intense desire to assert the national identity came to be reflected in the foundation of many Societies and Associations right from the middle of the nineteenth century. Moderate in their outlook, utterly loyal to the Crown yet intensely patriotic, the early pioneers of our national movement also paid attention to the spread of extra-academic learning among the general masses.

Shashipada Institute was founded in the northern suburbs of Calcutta in 1876, the same year as the Indian Association, the first political party in India. Shashipada Banerji (1840-1924) had devoted his life to the uplift of the newly-emerging working class. He founded

night schools for workers and did much for female education. It is no wonder, therefore, that this library, originally called Baranagar People's Library, should have come into existence in 1876. The same national spirit gave birth to the Taltala Public Library in 1882. Surendranath Banerji the 'Rashtraguru' was the first president of this library, and remained so to the last day of his life.

The agitation over the Ilbert Bill (1883) made people more curious about what was happening around them. They wanted to read newspapers. This modest desire led to the foundation of the Bagbazar Reading Library (1883), later amalgamated with Kambuliatala Library and Jorasanko Library (1904).

In 1889, some enthusiastic young men of north Calcutta set up the Chaitanya Library. Such luminaries of the age as Dr. Mahendralal Sarkar, Rasbihari Ghosh, Bankimchandra Chatterji, Gurudas Banerji and even Rabindranath Thakur were associated with it. Some of Rabindranath's famous articles and speeches were first read out here.

The nineteenth century also witnessed the foundation of the Kumartuli Institute Library (1884), the Kalighat Library and Free Reading Room (1889), the Albert Library (1890: now renamed Bharati Parishad) and the Calcutta University Institute Library (1891). A number of notable libraries also sprang up around this time in the suburbs. Jaykrishna Library in Uttarpara, the earliest and richest of these, was founded as early as 1859: the West Bengal Government assumed charge of it in 1967. There followed the Shibpur Public Library (1878), the Bali Public Library (1883), the Bantra Public Library (1884), the Mahiari Public Library (1886), the Pallibharati Granthagar (1888) at Mugkalyan, Haora, and the Belur Public Library (1894).

By the turn of the century, revolutionary nationalism was very much in the air. Surendranath Banerji himself had spread the message of Mazzini and Garibaldi. Now the first secret society in Calcutta was established in 1902, to be known later as the Anushilan Samiti. The library and the gymnasium were the two arenas where the new ideology was spread and members recruited. This was, of course, an all-Bengal phenomenon, but Calcutta as usual was the epicentre. Sister Nivedita donated a large number of books from her personal collection to the Anushilan Samiti.

32.1 Ramgopal Ghosh





After the Alipur Bomb Case (1908), many of these books were seized by the police in their extensive search for seditious literature. Proscribed books, cleverly hidden among innocuous religious texts and biographies, circulated secretly from hand to hand even after the revolutionary societies were disbanded. Thus the Hemchandra Library (1907) at Khidirpur grew up around the collection of the South Calcutta Branch of the Anushilan Samiti. Many of these libraries have not survived; but they have a place of honour in the annals of Calcutta libraries.

Needless to say, most libraries founded in the first half of this century were non-political in purpose. Many of these are still extant, mostly against heavy odds; but some are thriving, and some deserve special mention for their laudable and unusual aims: the library in the Jadabpur TB Hospital (1935), or the Kanai Smriti Pathagar (1942) and Chinmayee Smriti Pathagar (1947), small but sincere attempts to provide books to housewives.

There was a spurt of new libraries after Independence. Specially during the Second and Third Five-Year Plans, a number of libraries sprang up under government sponsorship or at the initiative of voluntary organizations. The new Libraries Act of 1979 has made the running of some libraries a little easier because of government aid and payment of salaries to a few members of the staff. The libraries of

academic institutions have expanded, especially those at the three universities and at Presidency College. The Calcutta University Library – the city's largest after the National Library – has upwards of 8 lakh volumes. Like the University itself, it is dispersed over a number of sites; but the Central Library is housed in a huge functionally-designed building on College Street where the old Senate House once stood.

Libraries have become a part of Calcutta culture. This is borne out by the libraries founded in memory of local celebrities like Madhusudan Datta (not the poet) and Rabindra Maitra. The libraries also reflect the cosmopolitan character of the city: there are the Gouriya Vaishnav Sammilani Library (founded in 1911), the Muslim Institute Library (1902), the Muslim Literary Society Library, the Mahabodhi Society Library, the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj Library (1879), the Shwetambar Jain Library, the Bishop's College, the Vivekananda Society Library, and the Arabinda Pathamandir. The Ramkrishna Mission runs one of the largest and most widely-used libraries in the city, with some 1.5 lakh volumes catering to academic and general readers alike.

Some names also evince other interests: the Nebutala Depressed Classes League Pathagar, the Kaibarta Samiti Granthagar, the West Bengal Provincial Depressed Classes League Pathagar, the Brajchandra Night School

32.2 *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad*

32.3 *Sister Nivedita*



32.4 Ramkrishna
Mission Institute of
Culture



32.5 National Library



Pathagar – or in another direction, the public library run by the Second Battalion of the Calcutta Armed Police. And there are of course some very special libraries. The memorable collection of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, covering not only Bengali literature and culture but much else, is used by casual readers and serious researchers alike. Along with it go the Sanskrita Sahitya Parishad, the Muhammad Ali Library (which has the city's largest collection of Urdu books), the Ahindra Choudhuri Natya Pathagar for books on drama, the Nitish Lahiri Children's Library, the Muzaffar Ahmed Library, and the library of the Bangiya Bignan Parishad.

In this city of the unexpected, voluntary organizations and altruistic workers always seem forthcoming, in spite of the increasingly bourgeois quality of general life. New libraries, journal clubs and free reading rooms, like charitable dispensaries, are still being added to the existing ones (Chetana at Hatibagan is a case in point). A small ground-floor room, some second-hand racks, a few hundred books, newspapers and journals, three or four score members – and there we have a library set up in an obscure by-lane. An old man stands there grumbling. He cannot get the book by his favourite author because the only copy is 'out'. The youth behind the counter is apologetic, but it cannot be helped.

That is Calcutta. She dreams of many things and makes endless ventures, though she never has the wherewithal to satisfy them all. Ranganathan's fifth law of Library Science states that 'The library is a growing organism'. We may say the same of the entire world of Calcutta's libraries.



COLLEGE STREET



Debasis Bose

When the Lottery Committee set about building a better Calcutta in the early nineteenth century, one of its greatest contributions was the road axis along Cornwallis Street, College Street, Wellington Street and Wellesley Street: straight, central and convenient, like a brisk youth among the devious elder thoroughfares of the old city. Of the four roads, College Street is the only one that retains its old name; but the planners' purpose hardly survives in today's congested, tramline-scarred thoroughfare.

This is symbolic of a greater and happier deviation: for this triumph of imperial town-planning became the great seedbed of the aspirations of the new Bengali middle class. It grew to house two premier colleges, of eastern and western learning, as well as the first medical college in Asia and, ultimately, the University. For close upon a century, the products of College Street virtually monopolized the administrative, academic and medical worlds of Bengal and even beyond. They still play an important part in all these spheres; but the street's greatest function is as the 'cultural capital of Calcutta', the wellspring of its literary and scholarly vitality.

The 'College' of College Street is the old Hindu (now Presidency) College, which moved into its own premises here in 1874 after temporary quarters in north Calcutta and then, for a long time, an unsatisfactory sharing of the Sanskrit College premises. The area is also

popularly known as *bai-para*, 'book quarter' or 'book mart'. But the appellation is only half-true: there is much else on College Street besides its legendary bookshops.

The street is best divided into four zones. The northernmost, between Keshab Sen Street and Mahatma Gandhi Road, is above all else the haunt of shoemakers. This was first a spillover from nearby Thanthania with its famous sandal-makers. Cones's Directory of 1874 already records nine shoemakers on College Street and even names one of them, Tulsi Mistri. Today there are scores of dealers, serving connoisseurs of sandal-making from all over the city. There is also a range of garment and hosiery shops – again recalling the days when the site of the present Presidency College and Hare School was occupied by a cluster of cloth-merchants. There were even two sellers and cleaners of cotton on College Street.

College Street Market, whose façade houses many of the garment and footwear shops, is a relatively recent entrant on the scene. It was built in 1917 after the dismantling of the old Madhab Babu's Bazaar to make room for Calcutta University. There was another market, Haji Karbulai's Bazar, also opposite College Square; but we find no mention of it later than a Gazetteer of 1841.

My account has already led us to the next section of the street, between Mahatma Gandhi Road and Surya Sen Street. This is the celebrated face of College Street, the world of





33.1 College Square : old view with (left to right) University Senate Hall, Hare School and Presidency College

Facing page :
Above :

33.2 Old book-shops on College Street

Below :

33.3 The statue of Krishnadas Pal

academics and bookmen. The pavements overflow with makeshift bookstalls; half hidden behind them are the established bookshops, between which loom the walls of Hindu School, Hare School, Presidency College and Calcutta University, with Sanskrit College nearby on Bankim Chatterji Street. The visible coexistence indicates the symbiotic relation between the educational institutions and the book trade.

Yet the College Street *bai-para* is little more than a hundred years old. Cones's Directory shows only two bookshops on the street in 1874. The number rises to seven in Thacker's Directory of 1886: S.K. Lahiri – reputedly the oldest establishment, set up with help from Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar – the Canning Library, the Shaik Brothers' Library, Chatterji Brothers, the National Library, the People's Library, and the Medical Schoolbook Depository. The Hindu Law Press may have combined printing with bookselling. Interestingly, there is no mention of today's giant among the College Street booksellers, Dasgupta and Company. The firm was set up in 1886 itself – perhaps after the Directory went to press.

P. M. Bagchi's Bengali Directory of 1899 records a remarkable increase in the bookshops, to the count of thirty-six. It also records, for the first time, five old-book shops, all owned by Muslims, who have played a pioneering role in College Street's old-book trade. Today, old-book stalls are everywhere. Most of them sell textbooks; but the front wall of Presidency College lodges the elite establishments of the

trade, where Calcutta scholars and intellectuals, and visitors in the know, come to hunt for treasures.

Perhaps it is these old-book shops, even more than the 'new' ones, that give the *bai-para* its unique mystique. The very walls of College Street seem to exude books. Bookstalls, big and small, are everywhere: they have overrun all the tributary lanes, with their pavements, crannies and cubby-holes.

In 1899 one bookseller, A. K. Ray and Company, also dealt in 'Titagarh paper; and the street boasted a press, an 'Electro-type and Wood Engraver' as well as an engraver *simpliciter*. Today the printers and blockmakers inhabit the warren of lanes east of College Street proper, while the paper merchants are ranged along Mahatma Gandhi Road, along with a surprising number of colourful shops selling wedding cards. But whatever the postal address, these too are part of the College Street ambience.

We must tear ourselves away to the next section of the street, between Surya Sen Street and Premchand Baral Street. As in the previous stretch the academic institutions supported the book trade, so here the Medical College shelters a range of establishments devoted to medical instruments, drugs and dentistry. In 1874 there were only five shops; in 1886 eight, including the still surviving dentists' firm of Laha and Sons. Two eminent doctors also practised here in 1886: Suryakumar Sarbadhikari at his 'Oriental Apothecary's Hall' at no 1, and Jagabandhu Basu at no 3. Legend has it that Dr Basu abjured his favourite *sandesh* until he had made a lakh of rupees from his practice – and lived to consume the sweet once more, his ambition realized.

Like the bookshops, the medical shops multiplied from the turn of the century. They were of all sorts: out of seventeen in 1899, two were homoeopathic, two 'electro-homoeopathic', four dental and one optical. There were also six midwives. The equipment shops came later. In recent years, they have grown almost like the bookstalls. Many small traders operate out of tiny shops ranged along the pavement opposite the Medical College. Interspersed among them are a cluster of shops selling plumbing goods and sanitaryware: in this line of ware too, College Street is 'Calcutta's capital', and plumbers from all over the city come here for their needs. There are also tailors, snack-sellers and,

most curiously, butchers. One meat-shop proudly announces its foundation by a Bengali Brahmin who was also a freedom fighter. An image of the goddess Kali stands in the shop: presumably the meat acquires sanctity by having been, as it were, sacrificed to her.

Unlike the first three sections of the street, the last – between Premchand Baral Street and Boubazar – has no commercial homogeneity. There are plumbers, booksellers, food and garment shops. Near the southern tip stands the *Chhanapatti* or curd market: we may recall that the old *Dayehata*, where *dai* or yoghurt was sold, was situated close by.

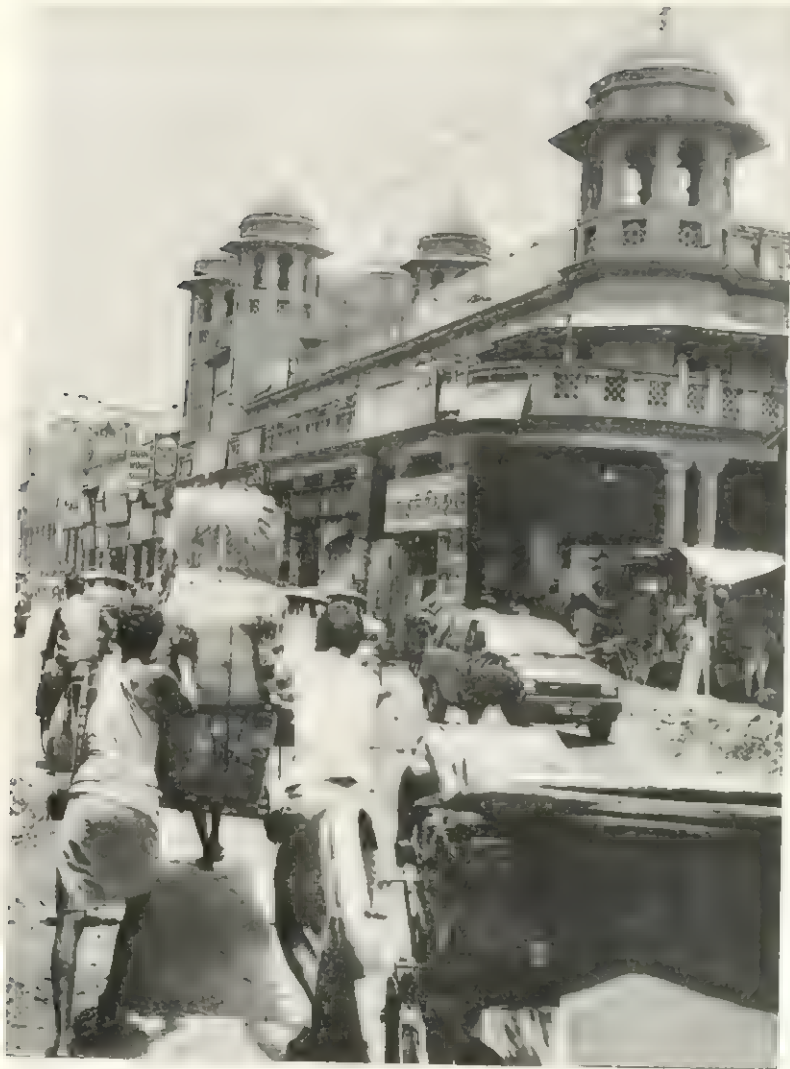
Other trades on College Street have disappeared with time. In 1874 there were four bamboo shops – first no doubt to build the huts on and around the street, then to provide scaffolding for brick buildings. Once the concrete jungle was complete, the bamboo shops disappeared, as did the *soorkee* or brick-powder mill listed in 1886.

In 1874 there were also four hackney-carriage stands, as well as a 'native coach-builder'. By 1907, these had given way to the Eastern Motor and Coach Works and two cycle works; in between, Calcutta Tramways had a stable for their horses.

College Street has a mosque and two temples that deserve attention. This was the mosque where the young Rajnarayan Basu, destined to become one of nineteenth-century Bengal's most original thinkers, gave out that he would be converted to Islam. Luckily, the flamboyant young liberal's hoax was discovered in time to prevent a crowd and possible violence. He later repented for having jested with religious matters in this way.

The temple at 71A College Street is a strange amalgam of Bengal folk-cults, as of north-Indian temple architecture and colonial style. The other temple, at no 18/1, dedicated to the Brajeshwar Shivalinga, was built in 1865 as a pleasing *atchala* but remodelled in 1946 into a gaudy *shikhara-mandir*. The sad metamorphosis was like a small anticipation of the pulling down of the University Senate Hall, the street's chief ornament, in 1961: it has been replaced by a towering library and administrative block. The other architectural glory of College Street is also under sentence of death: the original Medical College Hospital building, with its Corinthian pillars, elegant staircase and playful gargoyles.





33.4 College Street Market

History still breathes around neglected statues. At the junction of Mahatma Gandhi Road stands the figure of Krishnadas Pal, journalist and orator, largely obscured by the wares of a clutch of bag-sellers. His son Radhacharan's statue has disappeared altogether, knocked down by a military vehicle: the pedestal stands forlornly beside College Square. Almost as forlorn is Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's statue, also on the Square, and the grander statue of David Hare fronting Presidency College and Hare School. Hare is buried beside College Square: his opposition to Christian evangelism shut out his remains from all the cemeteries of the city.

Hardly anyone knows that College Square

has been renamed Vidyasagar Udyan. It is still popularly called *Goldighi*, the round tank, probably after its original shape. It houses one of the city's oldest swimming-pools and associated clubs. It is also the venue of a famous Durga Puja every year.

The immense cultural importance of College Street can be the subject for an entire book. Its history is linked to that of the Bengali intelligentsia, virtually born and nurtured on this street. The first phase was perhaps epitomized by Henry Derozio and his 'Young Bengal' movement, which scorned Hindu orthodoxy and resorted to western culture. Conversely, the Brahmos sought to reform orthodoxy. The Indian Association was set up at their instance in 1876 at 93 College Street, and only moved later to its present quarters on B.B. Ganguli Street. In those days, loyalty to the crown did not conflict with patriotism. Hence the Prince Consort's visit in 1875-76 inspired Keshabchandra Sen, the Brahmo leader, to establish the Albert Hall. This hall went on echoing with the oratory of the nation's leaders through the Freedom Movement. Now, converted to the College Street Coffee House, it resounds less grandly but no less vivaciously with the talk of the city's writers, artists and intellectuals, as well as the alertest section of its students.

In 1877, at Hare School, men like Bipinchandra Pal and Sundarimohan Das took a pledge in the presence of Shibnath Shastri – among other things, never to accept service under the foreign rulers. On this foundation was built the subsequent nationalist and revolutionary heritage of College Street. At the start of this century, the radical 'Jugantar' group had its headquarters opposite the Brajeshwar Temple. Independence did not put an end to this tradition. Through the food movement of the 1960s, followed by the disturbed years before and after 1970, the citizens of College Street have carried out their own distinctive struggles to better the world.

It is therefore fitting that the name of the street, and the academic and publishing life to which it bears testimony, should be linked, as I have described, with so much else that goes to make up the life of the city. With texts and textiles, cobbling and catering, College Street has fired the mind of Calcutta.

LITERATURE AND LITERARY LIFE IN CALCUTTA: THE AGE OF RABINDRANATH

Tapobrata Ghosh

The Death of Bankim: The Age of Rabindranath Begins

Bankimchandra Chatterji, the monarch of nineteenth-century Bengali letters, died on 8 April 1894. As the news spread, crowds rushed to join the funeral procession as it went down College Street, Cornwallis Street and Beadon Street to Nimtala Ghat. Passers-by left their shoes in a shop and walked barefoot; watchers came down from the housetops, and rich men left their carriages. 'Never before', says Bankim's biographer Shachishchandra Chatterji, 'had Bengalis paid such homage on a writer's death.'

Fifteen hundred people attended the condolence meeting at the Star Theatre on 28 April. Its mainstay was the speech by Rabindranath Thakur (Tagore). But even as Rabindranath reverently defined Bankim's achievement, he signified the end of the Bankim era: 'We remember the universal rejoicing when Bankim wedded the Bengali language to an idea in the full bloom of her youth. That day is now over.'

The nineteenth-century Bengali novel was characterized by a new realism. But in Bankim's novels, this was often impaired by romantic elements. This had provoked a reaction in Bankim's own day. Taraknath Ganguli attacked Bankim's fantasies and even his mannerisms both in his own novel

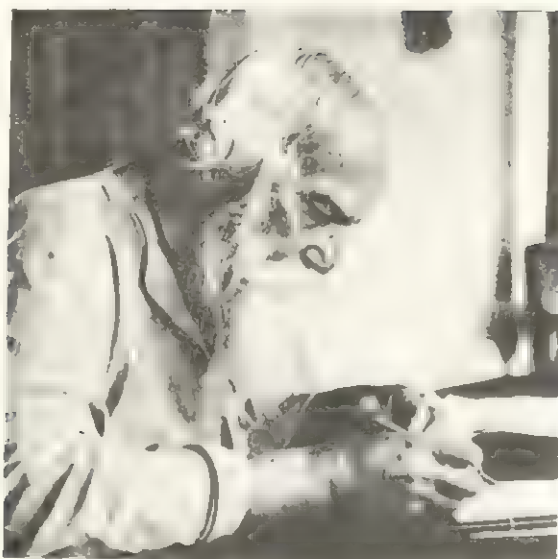
Swarnatala (1873) and in *obiter dicta*: 'Bankim's novels are failures – they are unnatural'. The Reverend Lalbihari Dey's *Bengal Peasant Life* (1874) began with a side-glance at 'Romantic adventures, intricate evolutions of the plot, striking occurrences, remarkable surprises, hair-breadth escapes, scenes of horror...'. In much the same spirit, Rabindranath wrote in an 1888 letter that Bankim's 'towering characters' might have belonged to any land and age: there was nothing distinctive about them. 'Bankim could not portray the Bengali.'

In 1891, Rabindranath published some half-dozen short stories in the weekly *Hitabadi*, among them such simple tales of daily Bengali life as *Denapaona*, *Postmaster* and *Taraprasanner Kirti*. The readers did not like them – 'Perhaps,' said Rabindranath later, 'because it was the age of Bankim.'

The world of Rabindranath's short stories truly unfolded after 1891 in the journal *Sadhana*, published by the Thakur family itself. Simple down-to-earth characters now rose in all their noble commonplaceness. In his dialogues entitled *Panchabhut* ('The Five Elements', 1897), Rabindranath disavowed the hero-figure: 'Now even the feeble and the failures have become major shareholders in life.' The next month saw his short story *Madhyabartini*. The romantic ending of Bankim's *Bishabriksha* was designedly reversed in his tale of Calcutta life: Rabindranath's anti-hero is 'feeble', a 'failure',

34.1 Bankimchandra Chatterji





Above :
34.2 Rabindranath
Thakur

Below :
34.3 Pramatha
Choudhuri

and utterly alone. The lonely men and women of modern Bengali literature have their origin in the age of Rabindranath.

His novel *Chokher Bali* (1899) also concentrated on character rather than narrative – a radically new departure. The characters come from the middle-class Calcutta society never treated by Bankim. In the opening rural sequence, social forces dominate; in the later Calcutta setting no man cares about his neighbour, each is torn apart by his or her inner doubts and conflicts. *Chokher Bali* is the first urban novel in Bengali: not only because it is set in Calcutta, but because it presents the anonymity, isolation and introspection of the city-dweller.

Of course Rabindranath was not writing only fiction. At the turn of the century, the poetry-reading public of Calcutta was split into two camps: the admirers of Hemchandra Banerji and Nabinchandra Sen, and those of 'Rabi Thakur'. 'In many Calcutta hostels,' wrote Prabhatkumar Mukherji (1873–1932), 'discussions of Rabindranath's poetry were liable to end in fisticuffs... No other writer in Bengal has made such friends and such enemies. Rabindranath's poetry is like a sea waiting out there. If your heart has the least breach in its dykes, the water enters; gradually the gap widens, until the whole heart is submerged.'

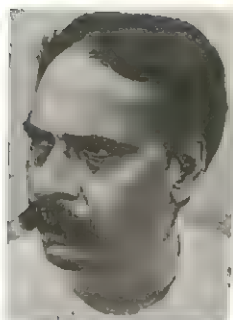
Although Rabindranath ceased to live in Calcutta after 1891, his was the overwhelming presence in the literary world of the city through the first half of the twentieth century. The 1890s marked a unique prelude to this 'Age

of Rabindranath'. Before it, the poet's genius was embryonic; afterwards it had become an accepted fact. The ten years in between gave a critical modern public the rare chance of seeing a world-class poetic genius manifest itself. *Manasi*, *Sonar Tari* (The Golden Boat), *Chitra*, *Chaitali*, *Kanika*, *Katha*, *Kahini*, *Kalpana* and *Kshanika* – nine volumes in ten years. It was from this time that Calcutta became 'poetry city' for the Bengalis.

Rabindranath also produced three major plays in this period: *Raja o Rani* (1889), *Bisarjan* (1890) and *Malini* (1896). In his memoirs (*Jibansmriti*) the poet has written how one of his youthful 'literary gods' was Shakespeare with his forceful passion rising to 'conflagration'. This incendiary passion is very evident in the first two plays; *Malini* by contrast is simple and restrained, and the poet's friend R.C. Trevelyan was later to compare it to Attic drama. But all three contrast sharply with the commercial theatre of the time. Rabindranath had nothing in common with this theatre, but he made a few abortive sallies towards it.

By and large his plays were performed at this time within the Thakur household: *Raja o Rani* at his elder brother Satyendranath's house with Rabindranath as King Bikramdeb, *Bisarjan* at Jorasanko. In *Raja o Rani*, the role of Queen Sumitra was acted by Rabindranath's sister-in-law Gnanadanandini Debi: a historic move that called down great opprobrium on the organizers. The sets for *Bisarjan* were made by a European designer and modelled on the Ellora Caves and Mughal court paintings. Later on Rabindranath rejected the 'expensive rubbish' of European-style realistic theatre for the simple forms of the indigenous *jatra*. Clearly that stage was yet to come.

A literary *majlis* used to be held at Satyendranath Thakur's house on Park Street. It was attended, from among the family, by Dwijendranath, Satyendranath, Jyotirindranath, Balendranath and Sarala Debi; among friends, by Jagadindranath Ray, Lokendranath Palit, Sharatkumari Choudhurani and Pramatha Choudhuri. The deliberations of the *majlis* were noted in a book which was not to be circulated outside the family and whose contents were not to be published. But among the subjects discussed, we know, were 'The Bengali language and the Bengali character', 'The elements of poetry', 'Chivalry', and 'Love in women and in men'.



Abanindranath and his friends set up a Dramatic Club at Jorasanko. After its demise, Rabindranath and Gaganendranath proposed a 'Whimsical Society' (Khamkheyali Sabha) in 1897, attended besides the Thakurs by Jagadishchandra Basu, Dwijendralal Ray, Priyanath Sen, Atulprasad Sen and Chittaranjan Das. Monthly sessions were held in turn at each member's house, with the reading of poems or stories, short dramatic performances or music recitals. Rabindranath wrote songs for every session, and Dwijendralal would sing his comic songs with commendable gravity of mien.

Other Developments

A 'Bengali Academy of Literature' was set up at the Shobhabazar Raj Palace on 23 July 1893. Its president Maharaja Binaykrishna Deb explained its purpose in the academy's monthly journal:

Our ambition is to encourage latent talents; to cultivate the taste for healthful literature; to purify and elevate Bengali literature; to steer the national language to a proper standard.

In February 1894 the Academy adopted the Bengali name of 'Bangiya Sahitya Parishad'. The same year, Rameshchandra Datta (1848-1909), historian and novelist, was elected President with Rabindranath and Nabinchandra Sen (1847-1909) as Vice-Presidents. This was the start of Rabindranath's long and close association with the Parishad.

The Parishad's most significant activities at this time were the setting up of a committee to devise Bengali technical terms (*paribhasha*) and its efforts to introduce Bengali in university examinations. At the first annual meeting on 7 April 1895, Rabindranath declared: 'The time has come when Bengali letters is growing alive to its own future possibilities. Still a Vice-President, he made another historic speech in 1908 when the Parishad moved to its own premises on Upper Circular Road (now Acharya Praphullachandra Road).

Meanwhile in 1890, Dineshchandra Sen (1866-1939), a school teacher from Kumilla, had begun his historic work *Bangabhasha o Sahitya* (Bengali Language and Literature). Eschewing the scanty store of printed texts, Dineshchandra roamed the districts and gathered a treasure trove of early and medieval

Bengali manuscripts. When his book appeared in 1896, Calcutta was taken by storm. 'We did not know there was such a vast entity as early Bengali literature', wrote Rabindranath after the second edition in 1898.

Dineshchandra's researches and the setting up of the Sahitya Parishad generated a new pride among Calcutta's intellectuals in their literary heritage. It bore fruit in the literature of the anti-Partition movement.

There were others matters for pride as well. In 1895, Upendrakishore Raychoudhuri (1863-1915) set up his famous printing firm 'U. Ray and Sons' – first at 13 Cornwallis Street and from 1900, more famously, at 22 Sukea Street. These were the childhood homes of Sukumar Ray (1887-1923) and the seat of a family whose contribution to Bengali letters and culture is second only to the Thakurs'. While Upendrakishore's half-tone block printing transformed local book design, he, his brother Kuladaranjan (1878-1950) and his daughters Sukhalata (1886-1969) and Punyalata (1890-1974) brought about a new age in Bengali children's literature. Sukumar would set the seal on this development, to be followed in turn by his son Satyajit.

The Anti-Partition Movement

The 1905 movement against the Partition of Bengal shows how literature can give life to a radical political movement. Bankimchandra's song 'Bande Mataram' became a political hymn, his novel *Anandamath* a political gospel. The Anushilan Samiti was formed in Calcutta as a kind of actualization of the patriotic brotherhood envisaged in that work.

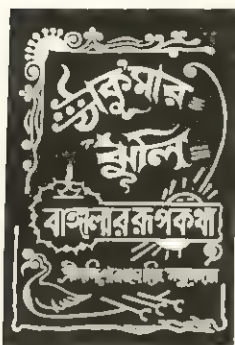
The Partition of Bengal, proposed by Lord Curzon in 1903, was announced on 7 July 1905 and put into effect on 16 October that year in the face of nationwide protests. A huge gathering at the Calcutta Town Hall on 7 August was roused by Rabindranath's song of *Sonar Bangla*: 'My golden Bengal, I love you'. During the historic protest on 16 October itself, crowds assembled at the riverside singing 'Bande Mataram', Rabindranath in the lead, while women blew conches and scattered rice-grains. The scene has been made immortal in Rabindranath's own *Gharey Bairey* ('The Home and the World', 1916). Bimala says 'Just as when the groom comes to the wedding gate, the neighbour-women stream out onto roof-tops and windows and balconies, ... how could they



Above :
34.4 Dineshchandra Sen

Below :
34.5 Upendrakishore Raychoudhuri





Above :
34.6 Thakurmar
Jhuli : the cover

Below :
34.7 Ramananda
Chatterji

stay quietly at their housework when they heard the approaching strains of the whole nation's bridegroom?' The subsequent Rakhi-tying ceremony, conceived by Rabindranath, was accompanied by his song 'The soil of Bengal, the water of Bengal'. In the evening, a lakh-strong meeting at Bagbazar sang another of the poet's songs: 'The more their bonds grow harder, the more our bonds will break'.

Among the essayists of the Swadeshi Movement were Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar (1869-1912), Akshay Kumar Maitreya (1861-1930), and Hirendranath Datta (1868-1942). The theatre, that strongest of popular media, was used to good purpose by dramatists like Girishchandra Ghosh (1844-1912), Dwijendralal Ray (1863-1913) and Kshirodeprasad Vidyavinode (1863-1927). Dwijendralal, Rajanikanta Sen (1865-1910), Kaliprasanna Kavyavisharad (1861-1907) and Mukundadas (1868-1934) composed a repertoire of patriotic songs.

The greatest contribution came from Rabindranath. He was editing two journals at the time, the *Nabaparyay* (New Sequence) *Bangadarshan* (1901-1905) and *Bhandar* (1905). His anti-Partition essays generally appeared in these, the finest being *Swadeshi Samaj*, where he directs the Bengalis towards rural development and social reorganization. At a public reading of the text at the Minerva Theatre on 22 July 1904, the doors nearly collapsed in the crush. Rabindranath had to repeat his reading a few days later.

But the most forceful inspiration lay of course in his patriotic songs. He was going through troubled times: his wife and daughter had died recently, and he was himself in poor health. Yet he would meet young men nearly every evening at the Metropolitan Institution, singing and teaching them the songs.

Rabindranath nationalist programme lay chiefly in social organization. He has been called a 'Constructive Swadeshi'. Inevitably, he differed from the Moderates as well as the boycott-centred 'Non-Violent Extremists', and hence came finally to leave the Swadeshi Movement. The pain of this parting underlies the poems of *Kheya* (1906). But his greatest unhappiness was aroused by the violence of the terrorists. It reached a high point in 1908, just as Rabindranath's novel *Gora* was being serialized in *Prabasi*. The upheaval in the Bengali psyche

ever since the early nineteenth century finally carries Gora beyond nationalism to internationalism. His sense of India merges with his conception of the world.

Rabindriks and Anti-Rabindriks

A group of poets owing allegiance to Rabindranath emerged in the first decade of this century. Their leader was Satyendranath Datta (1882-1922); others were Karunanidhan Banerji (1877-1955), Jatindramohan Bagchi (1878-1948), Kumudranjan Mallik (1882-1970) and Kalidas Ray (1889-1975). They used to meet originally at the Chourangi office of the magazine *Manasi* edited by Jagadindranath Ray (1868-1926). Later the group revolved round *Bharati*, edited by Manilal Ganguli (1888-1929) and Sourindramohan Mukherji (1884-1966) from 1915-16. Their chief meeting-place was 22 Sukea Street. And Rabindranath himself used to come, by hackney carriage or on foot, to a more exalted venue: the house on Cornwallis Street next to the Brahmo Samaj, from where Ramananda Chatterji (1865-1943) ran *Prabasi* and *The Modern Review* after moving from Allahabad to Calcutta in 1908. *Prabasi*, the 'dweller away from home', had ceased to be such.

The first anti-Rabindranath circle had formed well before this, centring round Sureshchandra Samajpati's (1870-1921) journal *Sahitya* (founded 1890). Such hostility to the poet, using literary journals as the vehicle, was sustained by Chittaranjan Das's *Narayan* (1914) and Sajanikanta Das's (1900-62) *Shanibar Chithi* (1924). That such literary vendettas could destroy friendships is shown by the rift between Rabindranath and Dwijendralal Ray: the latter's mounting attacks culminated in a harsh and indecorous lampoon, *Ananda-Biday*. The play was billed at the Star Theatre on 16 December 1912. Satyendranath Datta stood up from the audience and hurled a shoe at the stage: pandemonium ensued. Rabindranath was abroad at the time; but his reaction was made clear when, almost a year later, he turned back the 500-strong Calcutta contingent (including many of his detractors) who had gone to Shantiniketan by special train to congratulate him on winning the Nobel Prize.

Seeing the matter in perspective today, we can discern a deeper opposition behind the merely personal animosities. The controversy



over Rabindranath was actually the conflict of two literary ideals or tendencies for which 'classical' and 'romantic' are perhaps as good titles as any. Dwijendralal was heir to the classical tradition descending through Michael Madhusudhan Datta, Hemchandra and Nabinchandra. He was not only threatened but sincerely disturbed by the romantic tradition founded by Rabindranath. No doubt he sensed already that history would give its judgement in the latter's favour.

Other Matters

It was Rabindranath who first interested the scholarly world of Calcutta in the neglected folk literature of Bengal. The collection of *bratakathas* – folk-narratives accompanying women's votive rituals – had begun already. There now appeared the 'king' of the Bengali nursery folk-tale, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar (1877-1957): his *Thakurmar Jhuli* ('Grandmother's Pack') appeared in 1907. That very different master of children's literature, Sukumar Ray, also founded his 'Nonsense Club' in his house at 22 Sukea Street at about the same time. Sukumar's unique fantasy-world first acquired substance from the collective deliberations of the Club. They also brought out a magazine, *Sarey-Batrish Bhaja* ('Savoury Mix').

Later, on moving to Garpar Road in 1914, Sukumar convened the 'Monday Club'. Here, in response to invitations couched in Sukumar's witty verse, would come such young luminaries as Satyendranath Datta, Atulprasad Sen, Kalidas Nag, Amal Hom, Prashanta Mahalanabish and Hirenkumar Sanyal. *Sandesh*, the great children's magazine founded by Sukumar's father Upendrakishore, had already begun to appear from 1913.

But the greatest literary event at this point was the emergence of Sharatchandra Chatterji (1876-1938). His *Bardidi* was published in *Bharati* in 1907 in three instalments; the first two were unsigned and universally taken to be Rabindranath's work. Only the last number revealed the author to be an unknown Burma migrant.

The First World War: A New Phase

The First World War began on 4 August 1914. Three months earlier, on Rabindranath's

“বার ত বার”

ANNUAL MEETING

Monday September 2, 1918, at 6-30 p.m.

100 GURPAR ROAD

AGENDA OF BUSINESS:

1. The Secretary to present his annual mis-statements.
2. Prof. Siddhantha to move: "To adopt or not to adopt—
that is the question."
3. Jibon Babu to protest: "Is this a report? If so, why not?"
4. Khodan Babu to propose: "That in the interest of plain living
and high thinking, tea and biscuits—" [Loud disturbance]
5. Storm of protests—chorus led by Jungli Babu.

GOD SAVE THE SECRETARY

birthday, Pramatha Choudhuri's (1868-1946) journal *Sabujpatra* ('The Green Leaf') had started a new age in Bengali letters. It even looked different: an unusual size, untarnished by a single advertisement, with a green cover as befitted its title and its spirit. Pramatha had earlier declared: 'I believe the colloquial language of Calcutta will become the literary language of the future'. *Sabujpatra* set out to make good this dream, abandoning the formal *sadhu bhasha*. The battle between *sadhu* and *chalit* soon grew into a generation war that engulfed the literary world of Calcutta.

Pramatha was also the proponent of the prose style named after his pseudonym, 'Birbal'. The writers who gathered every Saturday evening at the *Sabujpatra* camp undertook to disseminate this new vigorous, imaginative idiom: among them were Atulchandra Gupta (1884-1961), Kiranshankar Ray (1891-1949), Sureshchandra Chakrabarti (1901-73), Bishwapati Choudhuri (1896-1978), Dhurjatiprasad Mukherji (1894-1961) and Annadashankar Ray (1904-). But the Saturday evening sessions were more than literary talk: they have been called 'the finest instance of the intellectual *adda*', the assertion of the rational mind against all dogmas and superstitions.

Perhaps Pramatha's greatest achievement was that he managed to influence Rabindranath, so very much his senior. This is borne out by the essays and short stories that the latter wrote for *Sabujpatra* – in *chalit bhasha*, thereby calling down censure upon himself. The first such story, *Streer Patra*, was lampooned in a piece by Bipinchandra Pal in *Narayan*.

But the greatest controversy in which Rabindranath was now embroiled concerned the alleged unreality of his writings. Following Bipinchandra, Radhakamal Mukherji, a

From the top :
34.8 A notice of
Sukumar Ray's
Monday Club

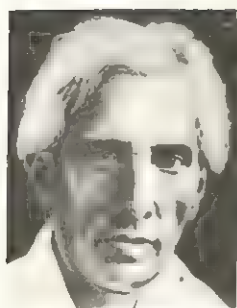
34.9 Sajanikanta Das





Above :
34.10 Gaganendranath
and Abanindranath
Thakur in a scene from
Dakghar staged at
Bichitra, Calcutta,
1917

Below :
34.11 Sharatchandra
Chatterji



professor of economics, opined from a limited utilitarian viewpoint that Rabindranath's literary world was 'no better than a Utopia unrelated to the soil and the common man. Rabindranath defended himself in *Sabujpatra*, and the battle soon grew fierce. (Later, the first generation of Indian Marxist critics were to bring the same charge against the poet, from a completely different ideological standpoint.)

In fact Rabindranath saw the First World War as the signal of a new age. The *Gitanjali* period over, he had begun the poems (1914-16) that were to go into *Balaka* – the commencement of modern Bengali poetry in theme, diction and prosody. His novel *Chaturanga* (1916) also marked a fresh departure. So still more significantly did his new symbolic plays: *Sharadotsab* ('Autumn Festival', 1908), *Raja* ('The King of the Dark Chamber', 1910), *Dakghar* ('The Post Office', 1912), *Achalayatan* ('The Closed House', 1912), and *Phalguni* ('The Play of Spring' 1916). In 1917-18 he began to experiment with a mixture of verse and prose – a course that would reach fullness later in the prose poems of *Punascha*.

The Three Men of Calcutta

In April 1916 Sharatchandra left Burma for good and came to settle in Calcutta. He had visited the city in 1912 and 1914, bringing with

him the first time the incomplete manuscript of *Charitraheen*. Editors fought for the prize. It went to *Bharatbarsha*, the new magazine about to be brought out by the Calcutta Evening Club; but the editor-elect, Dwijendralal, demurred after reading the manuscript. Sureshchandra Samajpati also praised the work but would not publish it in his *Sahitya*. The age could neither accept nor discard Sharatchandra. This impasse is a measure of his innovative power.

After his arrival in Calcutta, writing became Sharatchandra's only means of livelihood: he was Bengal's first professional writer. This ensured an abundant and lively output; it also involved inevitable compromises with his genius. He himself lamented to Sourindramohan Mukherji, 'There is no creature so wretched as the man who lives by writing alone'.

It was probably in 1916 or 1917, at the Bichitra Club at Jorasanko, that Sharatchandra first met Rabindranath. There were three literary giants in Calcutta at the time: Rabindranath flanked by the incisive, intellectual Pramatha Choudhuri on one side and the humane, emotive Sharatchandra on the other. The relation between Rabindranath and Sharatchandra in a complex nodal point in the history of Bengali letters. They differed not only on literary issues but in total outlook, Sharatchandra diverging notably from Rabindranath's exclusive and fastidious lifestyle. He moved farther away from the poet by actively supporting the Non-cooperation Movement and entering the intimate circle of Chittaranjan Das. The distance between the two is best measured by the letters they exchanged after Sharatchandra published *Pather Dabi* in support of the terrorist movement in 1926.

Meanwhile a club named 'Bichitra' had been set up at Jorasanko in 1915 as a meeting place for elite men of letters. At Jorasanko too in early 1916 was acted Rabindranath's *Phalguni*, the first Calcutta performance by the students and teachers of Shantiniketan. Rabindranath himself acted as the blind *baul* singer, and joined Abanindranath and Gaganendranath in designing the sets.

Sudhirchandra Sarkar's (1894-1968) memoirs record a telling if trivial development. Young poets and writers began to cultivate a special image: untidy hair, a goatee, a silk dhoti

and ochre kurta. This is close to the image of the emergent *Kallol* poets. It is also the model for Amit Ray, the hero of Rabindranath's *Shesher Kabita*.

After the War

The First World War ended on 11 November 1918. These who had hoped for Home Rule when the War ended were soon disillusioned. The Rowlatt Act was announced on 23 March 1919; the nation's protests brought forth more repression, culminating in the massacre of Jalianwala Bag on 13 April. On 29 May Rabindranath relinquished his knighthood. The Gandhian era had begun already; yet Rabindranath declared in August 1921 at the Calcutta University Institute that the call to Non-cooperation was not to him 'the call of truth'. The citizens of Calcutta were not a little confused, especially after Gandhi revoked the Non-cooperation Movement in 1922.

This period of political confusion coincided with the Great Depression and its corollary, unemployment. The poets of the *Kallol* generation grew up in this turmoil. But this was also the time when three new stars appeared in the literary sky: Jatindranath Sengupta (1887-1954), Mohitlal Majumdar (1888-1952) and Nazrul Islam (1898-1976). Jatindranath's philosophy of sorrow, Mohitlal's hedonism and Nazrul's revolutionary passion all influenced the *Kallol* poets.

Nazrul was the first Bengali writer with direct experience of the War. Demobilized in 1920, he took up quarters at the Bengal Muslim Literary Society (Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti) on College Street. From here appeared the journal *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya*, with communist-leader-to-be Muzaffar Ahmed (1889-1973) on the staff. Friendship with him drew Nazrul towards an egalitarian idealism based on romantic patriotic zeal rather than firm philosophy. He joined the Labour Swaraj Party in 1925 and became editor of its journal *Langal* ('The Plough'). His egalitarian (*Samyabadi*) group of poems appeared in the very first number. Since 1922 he had also edited *Dhumketu* ('The Comet'), whose fiery sentiments were approved by the extremist journal *Jugantar* and the Anushilan Samiti. The *Dhumketu* office on College Street was the haunt of Muslim writers like Humayun Kabir

(1906-69), Ghulam Mustafa (1897-1964) and Rezaul Karim (1903-).

Nazrul enjoyed the affection of the Thakurs from the start. Rabindranath wrote the poem *Dhumketu* for him, Abanindranath designed the cover of his first book of poems, *Agnibina* ('The Flaming Lyre', 1922). In September 1922 the magazine *Dhumketu* was seized on charges of sedition, and Nazrul sentenced to a year's imprisonment. When he went on hunger-strike in protest against prison conditions, Rabindranath sent a dismayed telegram: 'Give up hunger-strike; our literature claims you.'

Contemporary fiction also struck out in new directions. The worlds opened up by Sigmund Freud were explored in Bengali for the first time in the stories of Nareshchandra Sengupta (1882-1964) and Jagadish Gupta (1886-1957). Shailajananda Mukherji (1901-76) and 'Jubashwa' (Manish Ghatak, 1902-79) introduced another kind of realism: the first with his tales of the tribal coal-workers, the second with a strikingly open depiction of Calcutta's own slum life in *Pataldangar Panchali*.

Rabindranath remarked about the new novelists, 'I find the pen has suddenly abjured its privacy.' Such shamelessness was no doubt partly owing to continental influence. In 1927 *Kallol* serialized Achintyakumar Sengupta's (1904-76) translation of Knut Hamsun's *Pan*. Pabitra Ganguli (1893-1974) made some radical remarks to Shailajananda in their 'Paris Café' – the tea circle at Madan Mitra Lane.

The mind of man has revolted against thousands of years of tyranny: it is raising its head from the cave of the subconscious. It may take some time to appear in this country, but the continental novelists have already opted for the naked truth of the mind... Let's translate one or two radical continental novels. Let's see what happens.

And indeed Pabitra translated a story by Zola for the very first issue of *Kallol*. Later in 1928 he brought out a translation of Hamsun's *Hunger*.

'Kallol' and its Contemporary World

In 1921, Gokulchandra Nag (1895-1925) and Dineshranjan Das (1888-1941) set up the 'Four Arts Club' on Hazra Road, in association with Manindralal Basu and Sunita Debi. It was a kind of anticipation of the *Kallol* circle. The 'four arts' in question were literature, painting, music and drama. Gokulchandra practised all four as well as running a florist's shop in New



From the top :
34.12 Nazrul Islam

34.13 Nareshchandra Sengupta

34.14 Gokul Nag

From the top :

34.15 Bibhutibhushan
Banerji

34.16 Rajshekhar
Basu

34.17 Sudhindranath
Datta

Market: he was a very exceptional young romantic who died an untimely death.

In 1922 the Club produced an anthology of four stories by its four chief members, entitled *Jharer Dola* ('The Sway of the Storm'). They intended to bring out a monthly journal, but the Club was killed off before then by conservative attacks. Their plan was, however, realized in 1923 when Gokulchandra and Dineshranjan jointly launched *Kallol*. The *addas* of the *Kallol* circle would be held at Dinesh's house in Patuatola Lane.

Kallol was not alone in its anti-Rabindranath modernity: it had as its fellow-journals *Sanhati* (1923), *Uttara* (1925), *Kalikalam* (1926), *Pragati* (1926) and *Purbasha* (1932). But *Kallol* gave its name to the age. Of its circle of writers, Nazrul was twenty-five, Shailajananda twenty-two, Achintya and Premendra Mitra (1904-88) under twenty and Buddhadeb Basu (1968-1974) just fifteen. Much later Premendra recalled *Kallol* as 'a rebellious wave risen from the sullen vacancy of the material and intellectual world after the First World War'. It was 'anxious to test all life and civilization for inertness and decay'. Needless to say, it was defiantly antinomian. Wedding Freud to Marx, it saw the human entity as a combination of Biological Man and Economic Man. Any 'higher' idealized concept was meaningless to it.

Hence too, Rabindranath became the chief target of attack. Achintyakumar wrote in 1929:

Let my foes shoot countless arrows behind me. Let Rabindra Thakur sit blocking the road ahead: I shall light a keen fierce flame from my own eyes which shall dim the 'sun of the age.'

Shanibarer Chithi, though no friend of Rabindranath, indeed began to shoot countless arrows at these obstreperous young men. Satires, charges and counter-charges enlivened the world of letters, along with the perennial dispute over obscenity in literature. Rabindranath himself could not stay aloof: in two essays, in *Bichitra* and *Kallol*, he welcomed the new 'age of bold creative enthusiasm' but could not admit its demand for a more realistic literature. For him this was hyper-reality - 'curry-powder reality', 'the flaunting of poverty' combined with the 'unrestraint of lust'.

Sharatchandra, on the other hand, sided with the moderns. The conflict grew so acrimonious that Rabindranath called a meeting at the

Bichitra premises in March 1928 to resolve it. But even his good offices produced no lasting result.

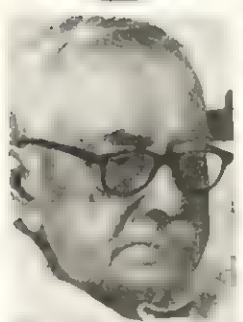
The controversy is provocatively presented in Rabindranath's own novel *Shesher Kabita* ('The Final Poem', published in book form in 1929). His hero Amit Ray detests Rabindranath, whose greatest crime is to 'remain so unjustly alive, aping the aged Wordsworth'. Labanya, on the contrary, declares him to be her favourite poet; and finally Amit has to use Rabindranath's own words to convey his last message to her. The rebel surrenders at last.

There was one prose-writer and one poet who absorbed and utilized Rabindranath rather than rebel against him. They stand out in their age: they lived in Calcutta but seemed to belong to some faraway world. Bibhutibhushan Banerji (1894-1950) made his debut in *Prabasi* in 1922. His novel *Pather Panchali* ('The Song of the Road') was begun in 1925 and published in book form in 1929. Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) was meanwhile forging the first original poetic idiom after Rabindranath: perhaps that was why he was pilloried and lampooned in the literary journals more than anybody else.

The theatre of this period is being chronicled elsewhere; but I must mention that in January 1927 at Jorasanko, 'respectable' women first danced on stage in a performance of Rabindranath's *Natir Puja*. The event had no small social repercussions. Significantly too, in 1929 Rabindranath himself vetted the script for Madhu Basu's film *Giribala*, based on the poet's story *Manbhanjan*. This was his earliest contact with the cinema. When the film was released in 1930 at the Crown (now Uttara) cinema, he came to the first show.

There had been a grand reception at the Town Hall on 26 January 1912 to celebrate Rabindranath's turning fifty. There was another on 27 December 1931 in his seventieth year, which saw the release of the festschrift *The Golden Book of Tagore*. In January 1933 Rabindranath delivered the Kamala Lectures at Calcutta University; his subject was 'The Religion of Man'.

There were many notable literary *addas* in that age: Rajshekhar Basu's (1880-1960) 'Utkendra Samiti', or those assembled around journals like *Sabujpatra* or Upendranath Ganguli's (1879-1950) *Bichitra* - the former patronized by young and the latter by older



writers. In this respect the mantle of *Sabujpatra* fell on *Parichay*, set up in July 1931 under the editorship of Sudhindranath Datta (1901-60). Their circle met on Friday evenings at Sudhindranath's family house on Cornwallis Street.

According to Buddhadeb Basu, the *Parichay* gatherings were somewhat too decorous, more like formal meetings than *addas*, and given to abstract discussion rather than to composing literature. But such cerebration helped to create a new intellectually-oriented Bengali novel, by such writers as Dilipkumar Ray, Annadasankar Ray and Dhurjatiprasad Mukherji. There were two poets in the *Parichay* group: Bishnu Dey (1909-82) and Sudhindranath himself. And their sessions were enlivened by Hasan Suhrawardy, Sushobhan Sarkar. Hiren-dranath Mukherji, Apurbakumar Chandra, Nirendranath Ray and Abu Sayeed Ayub.

The year 1935 saw another major 'new journal', Buddhadeb Basu's *Kabita*. As the title suggests, it played a crucial role in presenting the rising poets of the time: Jibanananda, Sudhindranath, Bishnu Dey, Amiya Chakrabarti (1901-44), Samar Sen (1916-87). And it had its *adda* as well, at 202 Rasbihari Avenue – Buddhadeb's favourite road, of which he has left a lyrical description in his recollections of his youth: 'gleaming in the rain, turning steel-blue by moonlight, dreamy in the semi-darkness of the still night.'

Fronted by a house given to poetry, the Calcutta street itself grew poetical.

The End of the Age

Rabindranath died on 7 August 1941. For the last two decades of his life, he had turned increasingly from the sky to the earth, from god to man. It is hard to find a comparable instance of such a purely human-oriented system of thought. But in his last years, this ideal of humanity was menaced by the twin spectres of modern science and modern war. He was profoundly disturbed, but he never lost his faith in man. It is expressed in his last birthday speech, 'The Crisis of Civilization' (*Sabhyatar Sankat*): 'I shall hope that after the great destruction, a new pure manifestation of the self shall rise from the eastern horizon into the ascetically cloudless sky of human history.'

I began with the account of a funeral procession; let me end with another:

The news soon spreads all over the city... Men stand ten deep [on the streets] and the balconies and housetops on either side are filled with women; flowers are showered, rose water is sprinkled on the bier...

The procession arriv[es] in College Street in front of the Senate House... Another brief halt is made in front of the Prayer Hall of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj...

Rabindranath's funeral was not unmarred by the turbulence of frenzied grief; but the essential account above might stand as a symbol for the master-poet's place in the life of the city and its world of letters.

(Translated from Bengali)



কলৌল		
১৩০	জৈষ্ঠমাঘ	১ম সং
কলৌল		
হাসি পল্লব ও পুষ্পের ফুলের বিলাসিতা, অচল্য চন্দ্রের স্নেহের দর্শন ঈশ্বর প্রভুর মনের চৈতন্য, তারি লক্ষ্যে পিতার আত্মদীপ্তি অর্থাৎ বিশেষ আদি নির্ভরিতা মনে মনে মনে কোন্ অগ্নিভাষে কে দিল এতদ জ্ঞান যেখা মীমাংসার কোন্ বাক্যে বাক্য অর্থাৎ মীমাংসার কোন্ বাক্যে বাক্য		

34.18 Literary journals



‘TOWARDS A NEW BEGINNING’ THE LITERARY WORLD OF MODERN CALCUTTA, 1941-1980

Shankha Ghosh

On the day of Rabindranath Thakur's death, Calcutta showed a distracted face to Swati, the heroine of Buddhadeb Basu's novel *Tithidore*. By the pallid light of a cloudy day, she saw

a strange agitation in the crowd, strange even for Esplanade. The suit-clad official, the black-coated lawyer, the middle-aged umbrella-wielding clerks and the slim youthful ones, Englishmen, Chinamen, Madrasis, Parsis, priests; Chourangi, Dharmatala, Curzon Park, Corporation Street – people were moving from all to all directions, but as though no-one knew where they were going, as though they had lost their bearings somewhat: as though they had forgotten the lesson learnt by rote, that you must go home as soon as office is over.

Besides this bereaved, bewildered crowd, Swati experienced something else that day. She met a poet, sitting alone in a shop and drinking, who thought the crowd's upsurge of grief was just a craze: the absence of Rabindranath could make no difference to those 'who had read nothing of him beyond *Katha o Kahini* [a book of simple narrative poems]; or if they read, had not understood; or if they understood, had not taken it to heart' – people 'whose very existence was in defiance of Rabindranath'. This imaginary poet Dhruba Datta is obviously not the only spokesman of Calcutta's literary world, but he is indeed one of them. Arrogant and isolated, contemptuous of the common man, he could speak for a whole class of writers 'with

lips curled' in disdain: 'I had gone out and walked about for a long time. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer and came here.'

Tithidore was written by one of the leading poets of the 1930s. The poetry-loving characters of his novel treat Dhruba Datta with a certain scornful neglect: the novelist seems to be mocking such aloof bibulous poets. Yet some might ask whether Buddhadeb (1908-74) was not himself once a member of their tribe; whether Dhruba Datta's reaction to Rabindranath's death might not have been in some measure his creator's; whether a deep-rooted contempt for the masses was not implicit in the latter's own literary principles.

Buddhadeb Basu's house at 202 Rasbihari Avenue came to be known as 'Kabita Bhavan', the house of poetry: a regular *adda* would be held there, centring round the quarterly poetry magazine *Kabita* that Buddhadeb edited. All contemporary poets were invited to write for the magazine; but both journal and *adda* acquired a flavour of their own, whose chief feature was an aesthetic exclusiveness. They proposed to move far from the rabble and cultivate 'pure poetry'. Hence their preference was for the kind of writing 'that is good for all time, beautiful for all time, that can only be experienced by the pure soul in a peaceful setting'.

'Kabita Bhavan' stood at one end of Rasbihari Avenue. Near the other, at 1/10 Prince



Ghulam Muhammad Road, an *adda* of another sort would gather at the house of Bishnu Dey (1909-82). The two houses were separated by more than a stretch of road: Bishnu Dey's friends were pledged to literature in the cause of society and humanity. In 1948, thirteen years after *Kabita* began, this group brought out their journal *Sahityapatra*, to resist decadence and detachment in literature.

These two polar tendencies grew very marked in the literary world of Calcutta from the mid-1940s. But just before that, almost simultaneously with the death of Rabindranath, the national and international scene had been cast into turmoil, threatening our very existence. A radical change in Calcutta's cultural life was being signalled at that moment. Buddhadeb's Swati saw the city crowds tossed in the confusion of a single day's bereavement. That agitation was perpetuated by war, famine, riot and Partition. For the best part of the decade, people were waiting for a new beginning.

II

Somen Chanda, twenty-two years old, was marching to an anti-fascist rally at Dhaka at three o'clock on 8 March 1942. The procession was suddenly attacked and the young man killed. A writer of great promise died that day.

There were strong protests in Calcutta: the threat of fascism had been brought home. The writers of Calcutta called a meeting on 28 March with Ramananda Chatterji, the venerable editor of *Prabasi*, as chairman, supported by Atulchandra Gupta and Satyendranath Majumdar. The attendance was not confined to the Progressive Writers' Association. Alongside the leftists Hirendranath Mukherji (1907-) and Gopal Haldar (1902-) came such vehement anti-leftists as Pramathanath Bishi (1901-85) and Sajanikanta Das (1900-62); Bishnu Dey and Buddhadeb Basu came together. It was decided at this meeting to dispense with the word 'Progressive' and form the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association. This body, which brought together such diverse minds as Jamini Ray the artist, Nareshchandra Sengupta (1882-1964) and Abu Sayeed Ayub (1906-82), had its first office in Bishnu Dey's house - soon to be exchanged for its familiar quarters at 46 Dharmatala Street (now Lenin Sarani). The



joint secretaries were Bishnu Dey and Subhash Mukherji (1919-).

A tide of anti-fascist writings, pictures and cartoons now began to flow. It was not surprising that leftist historians like Hiren Mukherji or Sushobhan Sarkar (1900-82) should contribute; more so that Buddhadeb Basu or his wife Pratibha (1915-) should do so. 'Politics had never been a factor in my life,' wrote Buddhadeb in *Sabhyata o Fascism* ('Civilization and Fascism'); but now, he felt, 'we must stand up against brute force if we are not to lose our very beings.' In the Dharmatala office or at public meetings, Tarashankar Banerji (1898-1971) and Manik Banerji (1908-56) would speak together; so would Atulchandra Gupta (1884-1961) and Bhupendranath Datta (1880-1961), or guests from other states like Sajjad Zaheer, Kaifi Azmi and Rahul Sankrityayan. Amiya Chakrabarti (1901-44) and Samar Sen (1916-87) wrote poems of protest; so did Subhash Mukherji :

Cry in voice of thunder
Today we will halt the bandits:
Japanese bombers never will
Fling to us our independence.

Several anthologies of anti-fascist poetry appeared: *Prachir*, *Eksutra*, *Akal*, *Janajuddher Gan*. The underlying motives were expressed by writers in the collection *Keno Likhi* ('Why I write') edited by Subhash and Hirankumar Sanyal (1899-1978).

Amidst all this excitement there emerged yet another, even younger poet, Sukanta Bhattacharya (1926-47). At 46 Dharmatala

Facing page :

35.1 Buddhadeb Basu

Above :

35.2 The artist Jamini Ray explains a point to Bishnu Dey

Below :

35.3 Sukanta Bhattacharya





From the top
35.4 A scene from
Nabanna

35.5 Hemanga
Bishwas

35.6 Jyotirindra
Maitra



Street one day, Tarashankar clasped the boy to his bosom on hearing his poem *Rabindranather Prati*. At no 46 again, Manik Banerji would read his short story *Haraner Natjamai*; Narayan Ganguli (1918-70), Nani Bhoomik, Sulekha Sanyal (1930-), Ghulam Quddus (1920-) would all read their stories. From the same house would appear in 1944 the new sequence of the journal *Parichay*, concluding the period of Sudhindranath Datta's (1901-60) editorship.

Within a year of founding the Association, Calcutta underwent another trauma: a stream of famine-stricken villagers pouring into the city and dying on its streets. Some time earlier, city-dwellers had been fleeing to the villages to escape Japanese air raids – a process chronicled in Bibhutibhushan Banerji's (1894-1950) *Anubartan*. Now the flow was reversed; and it was a movement of the dead and dying.

'In April on March 1943,' writes Tarashankar, 'a discussion on the literature of war was convened at the office of *Purbasha* on Ganeshchandra Avenue.' While returning from this meeting, Tarashankar found 'the seed of [his novel] *Manwantar* sown in his mind'. In this, his first novel on Calcutta life, he drew a harrowing picture of the 'perverted destructive avaricious hunger' of the traders and the poor men's 'helpless barter of their own selves'. Bibhutibhushan wrote *Ashani Sanket*; Manik, Narayan, Nabendu Ghosh and others turned

out one short story after another. And alongside them arose the Bengal branch of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).

The IPTA was formed at Bombay on 25 May 1943 to resist 'external aggression by the Fascist hordes' as well as 'internal repression by an alien Government'. Its weapons were drama, songs, poems and the folk arts. Soon after its formation, it faced the challenge of the famine. It was countered by the songs of Binay Ray, Hemanga Bishwas and Debabrata Bishwas and the plays of Bijan Bhattacharya (1917-78), Binay Ghosh (1917-80) and Shambhu Mitra (1915-). The centre-point was again no 46 Dharmatala Street. Harindranath Chatterji (1898-) would come there from time to time and teach them his rousing Hindi songs.

Harindranath's sessions have been described in the memoirs of Jyotirindra Maitra (1911-78). Jyotirindra himself drew a new musical inspiration from the streets of Calcutta. He has written: 'We could not stay at home. We left our literary *addas* and rehearsals and took to the streets. We encountered destitution and horrible death... We ran on restless feet and told ourselves, "We won't allow people to die."... Words and music flowed like a spring from the pain and suffering in our hearts. *Nabajibaner Gan* came into being.'

Nabajibaner Gan ('Songs of a New Life') and Shambhu Mitra's recitation of his long poem *Madhubangshir Gali* fired their audience. And simultaneously, Bengali theatre entered a new age with Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna*. The traditionalist poet Kalidas Ray (1889-1975) was to say that *Nabanna* 'disgusted me with my own callous comfort-loving life'. The new novelist Manik Banerji thought equally how the actors had 'made me conscious of my cowardice as a writer'. The IPTA had opened his eyes: he now realized that to accuse the public of inertness showed a weakness in the writer himself, that 'I will now be a better writer for admitting this weakness in myself.'

Whether this would actually be the case was of course a point of debate. Did the author of *Dibaratrer Kabya*, *Putulnacher Itikatha* or *Padmanadir Majhi* write anything comparable after declaring himself a communist in 1944? Many people lamented with Buddhadeb Basu that Manik should be adding to the 'great quantities of verse and fiction (if we must call them so) being written in Bengal at the moment merely to illustrate some particular political doctrine'.

Every conscious artist involved himself to a greater or lesser degree with the Progressives, Anti-Fascists and IPTA, simply because of the humane aspect of these movements. But not all could accept the concomitant political outlook. Subtle differences of opinion soon broke out even among fellow-travellers. Some like Shambhu Mitra left the IPTA. It followed inevitably that anti-Marxist writers should view such organizations as a sinister force. Tarashankar says in his memoirs that he could not at first ascribe narrow political motives to a body that numbered Ramananda Chatterji and Atul Gupta among its members. When he did reach such a conclusion, he wrote to P.C. Joshi, Secretary of the Communist Party of India: 'As regards your party-policy, I disagree with you on many points... My creed is *Ahimsa* and Truth.'

This creed was professed by a diametrically opposed body, the Congress Literary Association (Congress Sahityasangha), formed in 1944. Sajanikanta Das became its leader by virtue of his editorship of *Shanibarar Chithi*. He managed to draw in writers of the stature of Mohitlal Majumdar (1888-1952), Tarashankar and 'Banaphul' (Balaichand Mukherji, 1899-1979). The Association even won some popular appeal through the songs of Sukriti Sen and plays like Sajanikanta's *Abhyuday*.

It should also be noted that the Anti-Fascists evaded certain leading national issues of the day. The worldwide threat of fascism made them ignore somewhat the shocking excesses committed by the British in their own country. They showed no interest in Mahatma Gandhi's 'Quit India' Movement of 1942. Manoj Basu (1901-87) did indeed write *August 1942* from outside the Anti-Fascist fold; but artistically speaking, it is a slight work. By contrast, an unknown writer living outside Bengal brought out a remarkable novel on the August Movement from an unknown publishing house in 1945. The novel was *Jagari*, its author Satinath Bhaduri (1906-65).

The pain-racked humanity of *Jagari* conquered all readers. But even in this response we see a leftist-rightist divide. The novel showed a certain slant against communism; that may have been why it found special favour in some quarters. Atul Gupta praised its 'penetration' and 'literary insight into truth'. Nirendranath Ray (1896-1966) and Gopal Halder, on the contrary, could not but attack Satinath's poli-

tics even while they gave his art unstinted praise.

The urge to judge literature by political standards was all too rife in that age. Tarashankar, the author of novels like *Dhatridebata*, *Kalindi*, *Ganadebata*, *Panchagram*, *Kabi* and *Hansulibanker Upakatha* – all within a few years – was attacked by the leftists. At a session held in Haora under Manik's chairmanship, the last-named work was said to be 'not literature at all, simply adventurous romanticism or romantic adventurism'. But the same author's *Manwantar* was castigated by the opposite camp because of its mild praise of communism. Again, on the one hand we have Buddhadeb writing to the consumptive, dying Sukanta: 'You have dissipated your powers in political verses. I feel sorry for you.' On the other, Manik and others found even Bishnu Dey insufficiently Marxist, one of the band of 'frauds by profession, wrapping their nothingness in the glitter of empty technique'.

Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) also suffered in this way. Even the young Nirendranath Chakrabarti (1924–) wrote in a review that the robust optimism of Ramendra Deshmukhya, a minor poet, was preferable to Jibanananda's self-destructive melancholy. The habitually reticent Jibanananda was stirred to protest, pointing out the right way to read a poem. Many readers at the time lacked the insight to see how Jibanananda had left behind his 'grey manuscript' (*Dhushar Pandulipi*) period and reached the heights of *Mahaprithibi* or *Sat-ti Tarar Timir*. The poet was seeing a 'strange darkness' around him in those days, as 'they who are blind now see the best of all'. In the Calcutta of 1946-47, he kept on declaring:

'I am Yaseen,
Hanif, Muhammad, Maqbul, Karim, Aziz –
And you?' Hand on my breast, his eyes upraised
In his dead face, churning the bloody river
He'll say: 'I'm Gagan, Bipin, Shashi, of
Pathuriaghata,
Maniktala, Shyambazar, Galiff Street, Entali...'

We have reached the Calcutta of communal riots, Calcutta on the eve of Partition.

In February 1946, during the agitations following the sentence of imprisonment passed on the INA leader Rashid Ali, Hindus and Muslims walked together down Dharmatala Street. Many people felt that day, like Rasul in Manik Banerji's *Chinha*, 'as though he had



Above :
35.7 Manik Banerji

Below :
35.8 Tarashankar
Banerji



35.9 Mangalacharan Chatterji

prayed for ages for this union of cool heads and warm hearts in the people of his nation, and saw today the start to the fulfilment of his prayers.' Nobody could have foreseen the devastation so soon after, on 16 August. The Muslim League's call for 'Direct Action' brought down four days' havoc upon Calcutta. The Independence that descended upon a fragmented nation the next August was its direct outcome.

Riots, Partition, Independence, more riots: caught in this whirlpool, writers and artists of many different hues joined forces once again. The Progressive Writers' Association and the Congress Literary Association held joint rallies; Tarashankar addressed the crowds, Bishnu Dey was hurt while resisting rioters. Bishnu has told us of his three Pathan neighbours besieged by the mob, of how one was being stoned when he dived into water to escape, of how Bishnu and the artist Nirad Majumdar were lynched when they tried to rescue the hapless man. This incident was the genesis of one of his finest poems, *Jal Dao* ('Give me water'). Not riots alone: the poem runs together memories of all our afflictions, the sighs born of Partition:

Everywhere see homeless men gasp in the shadows
In parks, camps, roadways, mansion porches, beds
on hard floors –

What do they think? Have they left their homes to
look for their country?

Where will they go? Perhaps to Haora, perhaps to
Dhaka...

But alongside such suffering there is hope for
the future as well, for

We are the men of this deathless earth:
We build the future on the tide of our own past
In our own present, on that bank and on this...

Hence this universal prayer sounds in the heart
of time, so that 'a mass of white *bel* flowers'
might bloom:

Give water –
Give water to my roots.

III

2 April 1952. Standing in the middle of Park Circus Maidan, an awestruck youth sees Manik Banerji striding over the diagonal path to a vast marquee. Subhash Mukherji is giving an interview, brandishing some typed English translations of the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet. Mangalacharan Chatterji in the press

enclosure is preparing to write his report. The names of the conveners are being announced from the rostrum: Ustad Alaaddin Khan, Uday Shankar, Jamini Ray, Mama Wadekar, Sumitranandan Pant, Vallathol, Mulk Raj Anand, Krishen Chander, Manik Banerji, Manoranjan Bhattacharya, Saifuddin Kichlu, Prithviraj Kapoor...

Even the film star Prithviraj, in his spotless white? Yes, for creative men of all sorts from all over the country have gathered here for a week's All-India Peace Conference. Premchand's *Godan* is to be acted alongside Tulsi Lahiri's *Chhenra Tar*, the folk singer Omar Sheikh to sing after Parfez Shahidi's *mushaira*, a 'battle of poets' to be waged between Sheikh Gomani and Ramesh Sheel. And all these people are speaking only of peace, are saying: 'Let us strive for peace on the basis of the values of life in which we believe – the dignity of man, the freedom of peoples, the brotherhood and equality of nations.'

It seems that this even had a far-reaching if indirect influence on the new literary generation of Calcutta. Over the next few years came the Panchsheel Pact with China, the Bandung Conference and Chou-en-Lai's slogan of 'Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai', Bulganin and Khrushchev's historic tour of India: it all went to foster a somewhat simplistic optimism, the hope of a homecoming after many battles.

Much at the same time, Calcutta saw the awesome rise of Ravi Shankar, Shambhu Mitra and Satyajit Ray, the appearance in successive years of a play like *Raktakarabi* and a film like *Pather Panchali*. Readers of Rabindranath's *Raktakarabi* ('Red Oleanders') in 1924 had thought the play another of the poet's riddling fantasies. Just thirty years later, Shambhu Mitra brought out the profound contemporary truths packed into every stratum of the play. All our old ideas about Rabindranath's drama changed: a new age began in Bengali theatrical history. The very next year, Satyajit Ray quickened our sense of cinema by bringing to life Bibhutibhusan's novel published twenty-five years earlier. For the first time in India, the cinema became a creative art inspiring other creative arts. Some young writers and students, led by Ram Basu (1925–), gathered to make just this point in the University Senate Hall. The artist Purnendu Pattrea has written: 'I remember drawing patterns (*alpana*) with a thick brush and white poster paint on the pavement outside

the Senate Hall. It was suddenly washed away in a drizzle. Sandipan [Chatterji] held an umbrella over me; I painted over the designs again', for 'after a long time, I was filled with joy at seeing life's disorderly shape brought to artistic fulfilment'.

All this seemed part of the Great Homecoming. Shambhu Mitra had been writing for many years of an Indian ideal of theatre, and trying to capture it on stage. Satyajit had been trying to touch the current of rural life in his early films – the Apu Trilogy, *Jalsaghar* or *Debi*. It was thus not unexpected that an annual Festival of Bengal Culture (*Banga Sanskriti Sammelan*) should come to be organized in Calcutta. It commenced in February 1955 under the presidency of Atulchandra Gupta at Muhammad Ali Park – where ten years earlier, an Anti-Fascist session had been held at the temporarily-named Rabindranagar, entered through the Somen Chanda Gateway. The Festival moved to Marcus Square a few years later, and then to the Maidan at the heart of the city. It was distinguished by poetry-reading sessions among other arts: it brought modern poets face to face with their readers.

The ground had already been prepared. In 1952, young poets like Arunkumar Sarkar (1922-80) and Naresh Guha (1924-) had trudged through the city streets with a striking new slogan: 'Read More Poems.' Buddhadeb had lent them exuberant support in the pages of *Kabita*:

On a Saturday afternoon, among the press of home-going commuters, a sudden cry went up: 'Read poetry! Read poetry! Bengalis can't live without poetry!' A crowd gathered, and a group of young men began to read their poems – in case the closed window in someone's mind suddenly flew open. We have heard of two such roadside meetings, at Esplanade and in front of the University; we have also heard there will be more.

Not that there were many more, but such as they were, they led to some other enterprises. Some even younger poets, students still, arranged a poetry meet at Scottish Church College in March 1953 which saw not only poetry readings but discussion of the problems of poetry by speakers like Ajit Datta (1907-79), Jyotirindra Maitra and Subhash Mukherji. It was agreed that such meets would be held four times a year so that the 'self-centred poet might lift up his eyes and look about him', as the very young Sunil Ganguli (1934-) put it.

These meets too were not held as planned. But a few months later came a historic event, the first poetry meet ever organized in the University Senate Hall. That venerable and daunting room heard two evenings of poetry, on 28 and 29 January 1954, from no fewer than 72 poets. The conveners were Niharranjan Ray (1903-81), Abu Sayeed Ayub and Dilipkumar ('D.K.') Gupta (1918-77). The crowd overflowed from the room to the corridor, from the corridor to the stairs. A rapt audience heard *Banalata Sen* and *Suchetana* from Jibanananda's lips and *Nandimukh* and *Jajati* from Sudhindranath's. Such magic was matched by the wonder of new discoveries: Alokranjan Dasgupta (1933-), then just twenty, overwhelmed the audience with his single piece, *Amar Thakuma*.

Henceforth a poetry session became a regular feature of any cultural meet in Bengal. The *Banga Sanskriti Sammelan* did no more than was expected. More remarkable was an event at Jorasanko in May 1957. This comprised more than readings. For three days, Birendra Chatterji's group organized a 'Poetry Fair' (*Kabita Mela*) with an exhibition of poetry books and modern art. The programme covered everything from early Bengali poetry to the work of 130 recent poets, as well as *baul* songs, *kabials'* exchanges, plays and dances. There was also a felicitation for two poetry editors, Buddhadeb Basu and Sanjay Bhattacharya (1909-69).

Sanjay's was an important name in the early 1950s. A poet of the thirties, he wrote poetry, novels and essays, but was most feted by the young writers for his monthly journal *Purbasha*. It was a journal of long standing, but reached its highest glory in 1950-51. Readers would wait agog for its appearance punctually on the second of each English month. It serialized Achintyakumar Sengupta's (1904-76) controversial account of the *Kallol* writers; it brought new surprises every month with short stories by Narendranath Mitra (1917-75), Jyotirindra Nandi (1912-83) and Santoshkumar Ghosh (1920-85); it placed next to Jibanananda's complex, contemplative poems the sparkling pieces of young poets like Birendra Chatterji (1920-85), Nirendranath Chakrabarti and Arabinda Guha (1928-). Each number also carried a short profile of a modern European master-writer, written by Sanjay himself. And the contributors to the magazine kept its office at 54 Ganeshchandra Avenue humming with their *adda*.



35.10 Abu Sayeed Ayub

Another *adda* was instituted at the office of *Agrani* in Shibnarayan Das Lane. This leftist journal, run by Swarnakamal Bhattacharya (1908-64) and Praphulla Ray (1934-), was generous in its coverage: it published university students and gave them a voice in the *adda* as well. *Parichay* too had by then become an organ of the Communist Party, housed at 89 Mahatma Gandhi Road and edited first by Subhash Mukherji and then by Nani Bhounik. The *Parichay adda* threw up a question: was *Kallol* going to lend its name to an entire age of literature simply through the publicity it received? Achintyakumar's *Kallol-Jug* in *Purbasha* brought forth a reply: Hirankumar Sanyal's *Parichayer Kuri Bachhar* ('Twenty Years of *Parichay*'). Rightists and leftists were keeping up their old tussle: the former through *Kabita*, *Purbasha* or Humayun Kabir's *Chaturanga*, the latter in *Agrani*, *Parichay* and Bishnu Dey's *Sahityapatra*. Any new writer had to be identified with one or the other camp.

Some young writers did wonder whether such polarization was the only possible context for literary appraisal. A new journal for all young writers, irrespective of political creed, became a possibility. In August 1953 appeared *Krittibas*, edited by Dipak Majumdar (1934-), Sunil Ganguli and Ananda Bagchi (1933-) under the inspiration of Dilip Gupta or 'D.K.'.

College Street of the 1950s had 'D.K.' as its presiding spirit. His is the outstanding instance of the publisher playing a seminal role in forming literary taste. His house imprint, the Signet Press, was a sufficient guarantee of refinement, modernity and love of letters. At a time when even established writers could not find outlets, 'D.K.' brought out book after book with elegant covers by Satyajit Ray: poetry like Jibanananda Das's *Banalata Sen*, Sudhindranath's *Sangbarta* and Bishnu Dey's *Nam Rekhechhi Komal Gandhar*, and belles-lettres like Buddhadeb Basu's *Sahityacharcha*, Bishnu Dey's *Sahityer Bhabishyat* and Sudhindranath's *Swagata*. To build up interest among readers (and create potential customers) he also published a fortnightly bulletin, *Tukro Katha* ('Stray Words'), with literary news and quizzes. Anybody could walk into the Signet Bookshop on Bankim Chatterji Street, to browse even if not to buy: that too was then a rare experience in the bookland of College Street.

Krittibas appeared with 'D.K.'s' active support as 'the mouthpiece of the youngest poets'.

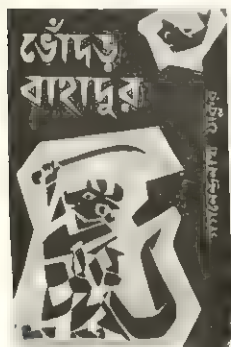
The first editorial declared that all young poets should form a group, because 'the *adda* of the assembled company keeps poets in good health; the stronger the friendships, the greater in fact their independence of composition.'

Even so, *Krittibas* was opposed by another band of equally young poets. It gradually became obvious that *Krittibas* tended towards self-expressive, self-centred writings. Another magazine from the southern end of the city, *Shatabhisha*, sought instead for the 'pure identity' of poetry: its editors were Alok Sarkar (1932-), Dipankar Dasgupta (1931-) and Tarun Mitra (1929-), with Alokranjan Dasgupta as a close associate. The *Krittibas* poets would rave over their new creations in north Calcutta, at the Shyambazar or College Street Coffee House or in Deshbandhu Park of an evening, even while the *Shatabhisha* group kept the Sutripti tea-shop opposite Deshapriya Park humming in the south.

There was another difference between the two groups: the *Krittibas* poets alone drew prose writers into their fold. Sharatkumar Mukherji (1930-) has written how Sandipan Chatterji would come to their *adda* at Deshbandhu Park: 'He would read in his low voice what were, though he did not know it, the best short stories he ever wrote. ...He was then remarkably lacking in self-confidence.' Shyamal Ganguli (1933-) was another member of the inner circle. That is why these young men could discuss the fiction of Manik or Kamal Majumdar as eagerly as the latest poetry by Amiya Chakrabarti or Bishnu Dey.

Kamalkumar Majumdar (1914-79) truly signalled a new age. In 1959, the Puja number of an obscure journal brought out his *Antarjali Jatra*. Few readers noticed it; but the young writers did, in their avid search for a restructuring of the conventional idioms of the language. This urge suddenly brought into being a bright young band of short-story writers: Moti Nandi (1933-), Shirshendu Mukherji (1935-), Debesh Ray (1936-), Dipendranath Banerji (1933-79), Sandipan Chatterji. 'Many of them will make fine writers, Bimal Babu,' remarked Narayan Ganguli to Bimal Kar. 'I'm not saying this simply because I'm their old teacher.' Against the vast novels of Bimal Mitra (1912-) – *Saheb Bibi Golam* or *Kari Diye Kinlam* – Bimal Kar (1921-) was then occupied with a series of slender volumes named *Chhotagalpa*: *Natun Riti* ('Short Stories: A New Mode') carrying pieces

35.11 Signet Press publications with covers by Satyajit Ray



like Dipen's *Jatayu* or Sandipan's *Bijaner Raktamangsha*. 'If Sandipan had printed that story in any well-known magazine,' wrote Bimal Kar, 'that single piece would have made him famous.'

Sandipan used two lines out of Pasternak in his story. Why Pasternak? His winning the Nobel Prize in 1958 had created ripples in Calcutta's literary world. Some saw in it an anti-communist conspiracy, others were glad of its anti-Soviet implications. Buddhadeb Basu took one side, Bishnu Dey the other. Amiya Chakrabarti said the last word: 'Pasternak has been overthrown by the wrestlers of both camps. ...Neither side can use his book as a weapon of victory.' Hence young writers too reflected this context, be it in Sandipan's stories or Dipak Majumdar's (1934-) essays.

A decade was drawing to an end: the poets of the 1930s were growing weary. Two of the greatest novelists of that generation died in these ten years, Bibhutibhusan in 1950 and Manik in 1956, as did two major poets, Jibanananda in 1954 and Sudhindranath in 1960. Jibanananda in poetry and Manik in the novel henceforth became the most popular models for young writers. The magazine *Kabita* virtually closed down; the historic Senate Hall was demolished. Day after day, Purnendu Pattrea recorded that demolition with his camera; Prithwish Ganguli made sketches; and Shakti Chatterji (1933-) laid aside his earliest medium, prose, to write *Senate* 1960:

A subtler thirst today builds streamlined houses,
Working its links by digging the heart's soil.
There is no end to you, my friends; trowels at the ready
You, wayfarers of change, go breaking down old
Calcutta...

IV

In the last week of October 1962, a band of writers passed through the streets of Calcutta singing patriotic songs, under the auspices of Birendra Chatterji's Cultural Society (Sanskriti Parishad). The common man needed strength and encouragement: for, incredibly, India was at war with China.

Were the heady days of 'Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai' nothing, then, but a passing show? The doubts sown by Khrushchev's anti-Stalinism and the Soviet invasion of Hungary were reinforced: the Communist Party of India began to crack. On the other side, this weapon gifted to

anti-Marxists was taken up by the weekly *Desh*. Every issue carried a defence of individualism by established writers under the heading *Shilpi Swadhinata* ('The Freedom of the Artist'); a pointed reversal of the 'Why I Write' anthology twenty years earlier. The author who had written rapturously of his trip to China now publicly burnt his book.

In a parallel movement, a branch of the Congress for Cultural Freedom was then operating in Calcutta. Associated with it was the English journal *Quest*, edited by Abu Sayeed Ayub. The Congress often held meetings in a house near the Dhakuria Lakes. On an evening in 1963, the *Krittibas* poets came here to stand for a sort of trial. None other than Buddhadeb Basu had charged the young poets with obscurity and a measure of obscenity, to the amazement of Professor Shashibhushan Dasgupta (1911-64): had not Buddhadeb and his peers been so castigated by Rabindranath, as indeed had the latter by the established poets of his own youth? Hence the young poets read their poems, practically in an atmosphere of war, to an elderly and chiefly academic audience. A few, like Shrikumar Banerji and Bijanbihari Bhattacharya, left half-way through; but at the end, Shashibhushan, the chairman, stunned everybody present by his unstinted support of the new generation.

Buddhadeb's indignation was not without reason. Before ten years were up, *Krittibas* took on an angry, even desperate tone. Sex, a sense of sin and a self-indulgent ethical perversity prevailed its pages till even its acting editor Sharatkumar Mukherji had to protest, '*Krittibas* is not a collection of hungry lustful writing.' The names of Shakti Chatterji, Binay Majumdar (1934-), and Utpalkumar Basu (1936-) had been linked to Sunil Ganguli's by that time, and their wayward life-style grew as proverbial as their poetic prowess. Allen Ginsberg came to Calcutta in 1962, and his influence was added to that provided by Buddhadeb Basu's 1961 translations of Baudelaire. Dissipation was almost considered the hallmark of the true poet.

Such Bohemianism also branched out into another movement that called itself the 'Hungry Generation'. Malay Raychoudhuri (1939-) declared in 1962:

The day of dipping one's pen in the cerebral cortex is past. Today poetry is written spontaneously, like an orgasm.



From the top
35.12 Bimal Kar



35.13 Sharatkumar
Mukherji

Armed with this credo, new lines in verse and prose were pursued by Subhash Ghosh, Shaileshwar Ghosh (1939-) and a few others; Shakti and Utpal were also said to belong. They had close links with the Beatniks, and many of their manifestos appeared in English. After a few volumes like Shaileshwar's curiously titled *Ghorar Sangey Bhoutik Kathabarta* ('Ghostly Conversations with a Horse') and Malay's *Shaitaner Mukh* and *Jakham*, several members of the group were arrested in September 1964 on charges of obscenity. Shakti disavowed all connection with them; Sunil too totally dissociated *Krittibas* from the Hungry Generation. Ginsberg tried to rustle up support in Calcutta for the victims. His strongly-worded letter to Abu Sayeed Ayub drew an equally strong response:

You may think it your duty to promote in the name of cultural freedom such adolescent pranks in Calcutta from halfway round the world, [but] I do not agree with you that it is the prime task of the Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom to take up the cause of these immature imitators of American Beatnik poetry.

The poets were soon released; but Utpal Basu – whose surrealist writings contained little apparent sexuality – lost his job in a girls' college. This was the first ever instance (barring the apocryphal story of Jibanananda's removal from City College) of dismissal from an academic post for such a reason; and it passed without protest. After a spell of unemployment, Utpal obtained a British job voucher and, in Sandipan's words, 'went off to England, brushing the ugly shadow of an aeroplane across the city's flank'.

Sunil and his fellow-poets had set up a link between poetry and conspicuous consumption: 'Now I want a Pontiac for my poetry', or

I've written poems; now I want White Horse scotch,
Chicken legs – no worse meat – cooked in pure
ghee...

Such wishes had a curious offshoot in a poetic titillation of 1966. From January that year, Shakti Chatterji brought out a weekly poetry magazine with a sketch by Debabrata Mukherji on every cover. If a weekly, why not a daily? For fifteen days in May, Bimal Raychoudhuri (1930-) and Shanti Lahiri (1936-) edited the *Dainik Kabita*, and enthusiasts like Tarapada Ray (1936-) hawked it in the streets each morning after working to produce it

through the night. The craze reached its climax when, from 10 a.m. on 7 May, Sushil Ray (1915-85) launched his hourly *Kabita Ghantiki*.

While pressland and College Street surrendered to the ephemeral, one table in the College Street Coffee House was reserved for a serious man correcting proofs: Nirmalya Acharya (1936-). With his actor-friend Soumitra Chatterji, he started the prestigious bimonthly *Ekshan* in 1961 with a cover designed by Satyajit Ray. Like any other little magazine, *Ekshan* soon ceased to appear regularly; but over the years, it acquired a special status by its uniquely sober, thoughtful anti-establishment stand. On the one hand, it reprinted some major but obscure pieces from the last century; on the other, it printed new stories like Kamal Majumdar's *Golapsundari*. Its distinctive character emerged from a combination of these elements.

Kamalkumar, of course, expressed himself equally through the contrary vehicles of *Ekshan* and *Krittibas*. When his *Suhasinir Pomatum* came out in *Krittibas*, Sunil Ganguli wrote:

I don't know how many years this story took to write, but printing it took over six months. He would smuggle out proofs from the press through his instruments Indranath [Majumdar] and Belal [Choudhuri], agonize for weeks over changing a single word, hold us in suspense till the end... One can scarcely believe that we are seeing this immensely powerful and mysterious writer in our lifetime with our own eyes, at the Wellington crossing at nine in the evening.'

The agony over a single word recalls the poet Siddheshwar Sen (1928-) who had the press opened at midnight to adjust a single comma. Yet this was also the time when the number of 'novels' in each Puja magazine rose from two to three to four, when unprotesting authors were turning out half-a-dozen novels and endless short stories against time.

The *Krittibas* poets were by now in their mid-thirties. A few had found jobs already with newspaper groups like the *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. They had even announced prizes for still younger poets. Many of the juniors were naturally seeking paths of their own. Against the demands of hunger, sex and mammonism, Pranabendu Dasgupta (1936-) tried to set up a serene centre for poetry in his journal *Alinda* (1964). The slow soliloquizing voices of Kalikrishna Guha (1944-) and Bhaskar Chakrabarti (1945-) were beginning to be heard, as also

35.14 Sunil Ganguli



Debarati Mitra (1946-) and Debiprasad Banerji's (1936-) poems with their tang of the soil. On the one hand, Pabitra Mukherji (1940-) was trying to bring together a new band of young poets; on the other, the elderly Jagadish Bhattacharya (1912-) was trying to bind the generations together in his quarterly *Kabi o Kabita* (1965), which presented such rare new talents as Gita Chatterji (1941-) and Shambhunath Chatterji (1930-). A different kind of literature was being attempted by other young writers in little magazines like *Kabipatra*, *Shruti*, *Eegal* and *Ei Dashak*. 'Poetry is not shouting, it is absorbed utterance'; 'Poetry should be personal, immersed and entirely inward'; 'We shall tell about ourselves in our stories'; 'Those who look any longer for a narrative in a story will be shot' – these were the slogans sent out by poets like Pushkar Dasgupta (1940-) or Sajal Banerji (1942-), or the self-styled 'Shastrabirodhi' (anti-traditional) story-writers like Ramanath Ray (1940-), Shekhar Basu (1940-) and Subrata Sengupta (1942-).

The progressives, of course, found both those who shouted and those who hated shouting equally decadent in their horror of politics. But the progressive movement in literature had lost its old impetus. When Subhash Mukherji won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1964, the reception given to him in the University Institute was like a political victory-rally. But soon afterwards, his partymen began to lose interest in his works, while Samareesh Basu (1924-88) was marked a reactionary. Samareesh had made his mark with *Adab*, a story set against the riots, in *Parichay* in 1948. Through *B.T. Roder Dharey* and *Uttaranga*, he had given hope that Tarashankar's mantle had fallen on leftist shoulders. In the mid-1960s, then, came his *Bibar*, *Patak* and *Prajapati*. These novels were stamped as existentialist. Santoshkumar Ghosh lauded them, and they were named in obscenity trials just like Buddhadeb Basu's *Rat Bharey Brishiti*. The progressives were alarmed at such delinquency in a promising writer.

Meanwhile the political scene in Calcutta had changed radically. The 1967 elections brought in a United Front Government in Bengal, ending twenty years of Congress rule. The change had been heralded by many events in the outwardly peaceful 1950s, from the police firing on a hunger-march in Koch Behar in 1951 to the food riots of 1959. These trends were captured more in films and plays than in

literature – by Ritwik Ghatak and Utpal Datta respectively, like Satyajit Ray and Shambhu Mitra in the previous decade.

Around 1964-65, another meeting-place for intellectuals was the second floor of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. (The Bangla Akademi of the West Bengal Government was not set up till 1986.) With the blessings of the Gandhian Nirmalkumar Basu, a quiet, industrious Marxist youth was dreaming of an 'Encyclopaedist Movement' by virtue of his assistant editorship of the Bengali encyclopaedia *Bharatkosh*, being brought out by the Parishad. Evening after evening, young Subir Raychoudhuri would thrash out points with the patient Chintaharan Chakrabarti; Shachindranath Ganguli would have arguments with Nirmal Basu; constant queries would be sent out to Sunitikumar Chatterji, Sukumar Sen, Rameshchandra Majumdar or Satyendranath Basu. A panel of scientists, litterateurs, philosophers and historians would sit around a huge round table. The whole show was controlled by that young man of thirty-two, Pradyumna Bhattacharya (1932-), who took charge not only of *Bharatkosh* but for a while also of *Sahityapatra*, that journal set up by Bishnu Dey which, through a relay of editors, kept an ideal of healthy culture alive for some two decades.

Pradyumna was backed by an organization. At the same time, however, a loquacious college student, Amarendra Chakrabarti (1942-) was moving between certain congenial houses spread across the city to set up an ideal forum for the discussion of modern poetry. Almost single-handedly, with the money saved from his allowance, he brought out an austere-produced monthly in May 1966 with discussions of five poems. Uniting the titles of two predecessors of opposite bents, it was called *Kabita-Parichay*. From the very second issue, an interest grew up around this magazine devoted to poems rather than poets. Writers like Ayub and Buddhadeb contributed unasked. Bishnu Dey commented in the August issue: 'Our education system has virtually ensured that we neglect the poem in favour of the poet's life and philosophy. Hence an effort like this is specially valuable.'

Was Calcutta, then, to be 'handed over to the leftists'? To prevent any such outcome, the Government was overthrown by machination. The city flared up in protest, and once more writers and artists led the ranks. Birendra



35.15 Samareesh Basu



Above :
35.16 Subhash
Mukherji

Below :
35.17 Niren
Chakrabarti

Chatterji and Subhash Mukherji joined protest marches and went to jail yet again. In the fifties, a line by Subhash had acquired the force of a popular slogan: 'Whether flowers bloom or not, it's spring today.' Now, before going to prison, he bequeathed a new slogan to the people: 'The road is the only road.'

V

21st February 1972. A new independent nation had been born two months earlier. The writers of this Bengal and that now met together on the anniversary of the Language Martyrs of Dhaka. It was like a festival of reunion.

Yet what had not both nations borne over the past year! From the end of March 1917, hordes – Muslim as well as Hindu – had fled across the border into Indian Bengal, posing for the people here a new crisis of shelter.

The old writers' haunt at 46 Dharmatala Street had disappeared; but close by, another dilapidated house was set up as a meeting-place for poets, actors and musicians from East Pakistan. Here they rehearsed the songs which they would then sing round the city to raise funds for the resistance movement. They were looked after by the writers of Calcutta, led (to the detriment of his own health) by Dipendranath Banerji. In that house, Sanjeeda Khatun and Wahed-ul Haq taught their troupe songs; the film director Zaheer Raihan recounted his experience. Local writers would gather in the evening. One day, trudging up the dark stairs, Subhash Mukherji paused and recited to a junior some lines from *Pherai*, his long poem then in progress. 'It is turning out well?' he asked. But the images evoked by *Pherai* were those of another agony, the Naxalite movement.

Birendra Chatterji raised a related question at the time: had Calcutta's writers, in their eager sympathy for compeers from East Bengal, forgotten the repression launched on the would-be revolutionaries in their own state? Not that such reactions were totally absent. Long ago, after Sukanta's death, Buddhadeb had written in *Kabita*:

He had made fun of the kite, not knowing that he himself was that very bird, ...a proud solitary flier now fallen among the crowded pavements ...

In the days of the second United Front Government, this image found transformation in

Nirendranath Chakrabarti's *Kalgharey Chiler Kanna* ('The Kite Crying in the Bathroom'):
Heaven-ranging kite!

Haven't I seen those who can't soar, and who,
Because they can't, infest

The world's waste-dumps and cattle-morgues like
gangs

Of thugs and cowards – haven't I ever seen,
At their hands, the torments of aspiring men?

Nirendranath is not thought of as a political poet, but this and many other poems in his *Ulanga Raja* (The King 'Without Clothes') grow political by a force working from within. Only his outlook differs from his predecessors.

In 1971, the same year as *Ulanga Raja*, Birendra Chatterji taunted Nirendranath almost in the fighting style of the old contests of the *kabials*:

Niren! has your naked king
Cast his clothes off, donned new clothes?
Or has the king himself been changed?

Birendra's very titles probe the bleeding wounds of the time: 'The Headless Corpses Scream for Joy', 'The Man-Eating Tigers Leap About', 'I Dare to Be King', 'Let a Thousand Funeral Pyres Burn in Every Quarter', 'I Marvel, Time, at Your Circus Show'. Later, the poet confided in an interview: 'I didn't have the time then to sort out what was poetry and what was not,' for he was out to condemn the police brutalities through 'unpoetic journalism'. In fact, Birendra set up a new idiom of anti-poetry that many young poets took up at that time.

In fiction, a comparable prominence was attained at the time by Mahashweta Debi (1926-). Breaking the mould of her own earlier writings, she now brought out stories like *Droupadi* and *Stanadayini* and novels like *Hajar Churashir Ma*, *Chetti Munda o Tar Tir* and *Aranyer Adhikar*. Every work was an attack on middle-class hypocrisy. Her actions took the same path as she began working directly among the adivasi tribes.

The Naxalite angle was adopted in many little magazines that appeared all over the city, from the original *Anushtup* to the more recent *Prastuti Parba*, *Nakshatrer Rode* and *Spandan*. Sometimes these would be seized from the newstands and burnt. Dronacharya Ghosh was murdered for his political work; Samir Ray was imprisoned. Laying aside the dreamy poems of his *Rajhangsa* series, Manibhushan Bhatta-

charya (1938-) launched into the strident, indignant pieces of *Gandhinagarey Ratri* ('Night in Gandhi-Town'). In a poem itself, he announced that he had abandoned poetry: 'Now I read only prose, Samar Sen's *Frontier*.'

Samar Sen (1916-87) had left the literary world long ago after writing some remarkable poetry between the ages of nineteen and thirty. He now returned as a journalist of vision, editing first *Now* instituted by Humayun Kabir and then *Frontier*, run by subscriptions from friends and relatives from a small room in Mott Lane. Editorship occupied the last two decades of his life. By his fearless criticism of both left and right excesses, this solitary man won an enviable distinction for himself.

'The seventies are a decade of liberation': every wall in Calcutta declared this credo of the moment. City and village were overrun with violence, young men fled to the countryside and even to the jungle: Subhash Mukherji wrote his *Chheley Gekhhey Baney* ('The Boy Has Gone to the Forest'). Returning from Narayan Ganguli's funeral in 1970, Mrinal Sen sat at a teashop explaining the new turn in his art, brought out through political films like *Calcutta 71*, *Padatik* and *Chorus*.

Badal Sarkar's (1925-) work changed too. In the previous decade he had written sad reflective plays like *Ebang Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas* and *Tringsha Shatabdi*. Now he produced *Bhoma*, *Michhil*, *Sukhpathya Bharater Itihas* and *Prastab*, exposing the politics of an exploitative society. Leaving Shambhu Mitra's *Bahurup*, he set up his own troupe, *Shatabdi*, for new theatrical experiments as well. His 'Third Theatre' played before street audiences in both towns and villages, without stage, lighting or costumes - a protest against the proscenium stage, a blow at the confines of middle-classdom. Such open theatre became a feature of this decade: Prabir Datta lost his life in 1974 in a police attack on such a performance in Curzon Park.

Meanwhile, every Saturday, an 'apolitical' gathering (or was it a new political ploy?) was being held on the Maidan: Jyotirmay Datta's 'Muktamela' or 'Free Fair'. Homebound commuters would walk in to see pictures being drawn, hear poems and stories read out: they could join in themselves if they wished. Tushar Ray (1938-79), the self-styled 'Bandmaster' of his own poem, leapt before the police shouting 'Policeman, policeman, / Take off your cap when you see a poet.' But many of these young

men destroyed themselves through the growing influence of drink and drugs. There was restlessness and menace in the air. And in midst of this, in 1975, the Government of India declared a state of emergency. The right to free speech was taken away.

The question rose all over the country: what were the writers to do now? Many submitted to the censor; others came forward in bold protest. Jyotirmay Datta (1936-) had been bringing out his magazine *Kalkata* for quite some time: he now came out with a special political number which sent the police after him and made him turn fugitive. Gourkishore Ghosh (1923-) went to jail. Even then Calcutta did not disown the literature of protest. Some of it was even published, defying the stamp of 'Not to be printed'. When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi asked to meet the city's intellectuals as Raj Bhavan in 1976, some stayed away in protest; others like Alokranjan went only to ask the Prime Minister to her face why they should submit to humiliating censorship.

Indeed it did not last long. The emergency was revoked; and shortly after, the Left Front Government took over in West Bengal. Here was another new beginning after thirty years of independence. The old literary institutions had dwindled by this time, but many new little magazine groups had sprung up. Weekly reviews had prospered amazingly: the circulation of *Desh* increased three times between the 1950s and 1960s, and sevenfold by the 1970s. Publishing houses and literary establishments also began to endow literature with undreamt-of wealth and power through endless prizes and honours. It pleases everybody when talent like that of Tarashankar, Bishnu Dey or Ashapurna Devi (1909-) is honoured with the Gnanpith Award; but an excess of lesser prizes burdens the atmosphere, reduces literature to the selling of wares. This at least was the reaction among a lot of thinking people in small groups, small magazines spread across the city.

Most of these publications ran into sand after one or two issues; but a few lasted, and offered something better than fashionable indulgence: Shibnarayan Ray's *Jignasa*, Samarendra Sengupta's *Bibhab*, Surajit Ghosh's *Prama*, Ashok Sen's *Baromas*. A few more vehicles for serious writing thus grew up alongside *Ekshan* and *Anushtup*. *Parichay* too is about to complete fifty years, its editorship assumed by Debesh Ray after the death of his friend and longtime

35.18 A line of little magazines



editor Dipendranath. Debesh had moved from Jalpaiguri to Calcutta by this time, carrying all north Bengal in his consciousness. Readers had begun to notice his work more and more. 'Do we have many writers with a style like Debesh's?' asked Ketaki Kushari Dyson of Bimal Kar.

The hyper-individuality of a self-conscious stylist can create problems, raising a barrier between poet and reader. This may be why novelists like Amiyabhushan Majumdar (1918-) and Ashim Ray (1927-85) came to regard themselves as neglected. On the other hand, the smooth flow of Sunil Ganguli's novels raised his popularity almost to legendary heights.

Such legends were largely nurtured by the commercial press. The patronage of the press became a new feature of the Bengali literary world. Authors gathered under the banner of a newspaper group: Shirshendu Mukherji, Ramapada Choudhuri (1922-) and Shankar (Manishankar) Mukherji, 1933-), for instance, in one fold, or Atin Banerji (1934-), Praphulla Ray and Ashutosh Mukherji (1922-) in another. And inevitably, small new groups and movements formed to defy or ignore all these establishments: their experimental poetry and prose filled the pages of little magazines.

Great and small, conservative and radical, leftist and rightist – all literary groups now converge once a year at Calcutta's new festival, the Book Fair. A ten-day fair was started on the Maidan, opposite the Planetarium, on 5 March 1976. It became an annual affair: all College Street brought its store of books here. It now has a few hundred stalls where not only booksellers and clients, but writers and readers can meet. Fans chase the 'star' authors as they

saunter about, while neglected youths thrust their writings into the hands of passers-by. An elderly poet like Arun Mitra (1909-), settled here after his retirement from Allahabad, blends easily among these juniormost enthusiasts. Besides the big publishers' pavilions, the row of little magazines is enlivened by spokesmen like Subimal Mishra (1943-).

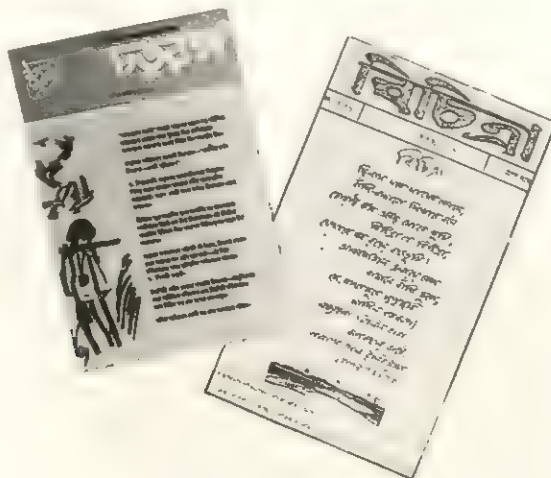
Alongside the magazines there are slender volumes of poetry, of one or two gatherings only, reminiscent of the old *Ek Payshay Ekti* ('A poem for a paisa') series brought out by the *Kabita* magazine in its earlier days. Sandipan Chatterji began publishing 'mini-books' some years ago: he walks about the Fair carrying them on a tray round his neck. Birendra Chatterji also roams round with his own and his juniors' books in a shoulderbag.


Encouraged by Ranajit Das (1950-) and Parthapratim Kanjilal (1949-), many young poets have come forward to publish such small books. From 1978 Sandip Datta (1951-) has, through his personal efforts, set up a library of little magazines at Tamer Lane. Such moves to bypass the inertness of our publishing system always draw support from writers. They promise a wider decentralization. Like Birendra Chatterji, everybody waits 'for a new beginning', everybody thinks.

Once more I'll seek out that miraculous dream
Which is my lost poetry,
Which is the world where I or any man must live:
I'll search it out,
Whatever price it costs me.


This dream is Calcutta's pride and her pledge
for the future.

(Translated from Bengali)





ENGLISH WRITING IN CALCUTTA



Ananda Lal

In the 155 years since Macaulay made English the official language of India, Calcutta emerged as the nerve centre of creative expression in English by Indians. Even before Macaulay's famous Minute, citizens of Calcutta had begun writing significantly in English. Rammohan Ray (1772-1833), our first important prose writer in English, authored seminal religious treatises and pamphlets against *sati*, while Henry Derozio (1809-31) is acknowledged as the first Indian poet in English. Kashiprasad Ghosh's *The Shair*, 200 pages of narrative verse published in Calcutta in 1830, qualified him as the first Bengali poet in English. Afterwards, Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-73), who studied in Calcutta and lived there in his later years, commenced his poetic career in English before turning to Bengali in his mature works. We sometimes forget that, similarly, Bankimchandra Chatterji (1838-94) wrote his first novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, in English. His contemporary Keshabchandra Sen (1838-84) left behind an extensive body of English sermons and philosophical discourses.

One particular family shone in nineteenth century Calcutta literary circles for its poetical effusions in English: the Dattas of Rambagan. The members produced a collaborative anthology, *The Dutt Family Album*, printed by Longmans and Green of London in 1870 – quite an achievement for the time. The most talented among the family elders, Shashichandra Datta,

later had his multi-volume collected works published in England too. His nephew, Rameshchandra Datta (1848-1909), the versatile historian, economist and novelist in Bengali and English, also wrote what was perhaps the first travelogue by an Indian in English (*Three Years in Europe*, 1872), translated the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* into English (1890, included in the Everyman's Library series) and was probably the first Indian contributor to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1902). Ramesh's cousins, Aru and Taru Datta, were the first Indian poetesses in English; the latter's posthumously-issued *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* marks a milestone in the history of Indian-English verse.

Only five years younger than Taru Datta, Rabindranath Thakur heralded a new literary age. He composed only one poem originally in English ("The Child"), but his translations of his own Bengali works are so free that they virtually count as English creations in their own right. Indeed, *Gitanjali* won the Nobel Prize on the strength of its English text.

Rabindranath's generation produced many of the colossi of modern India. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) wrote not only his celebrated lectures but poems too in English. Ramananda Chatterji (1865-1943) introduced serious English journalism with *The Modern Review*. Shri Arabinda (1872-1950), author or philosophical prose, poetry and drama in English, composed a spiritually symbolic





36.2 Nirad C.
Choudhuri



36.3 Amitabha Ghosh

blank-verse epic, *Savitri*, in 24,000 lines. His elder brother, Manmohan Ghosh (1869-1924), enjoys a growing reputation nowadays for his *fin-de-siècle* verse. All these men were born in Calcutta, or lived there, or both.

The burgeoning Independence movement brought with it the rise of the nationalist press, and such pioneering patriotic newspapers as the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *Bande Mataram* came out in English from Calcutta. In this context one should mention the literary output of expatriate Bengalis like the 'Nightingale of India', Sarojini Naidu, and her brother Harindranath Chatterji (Chattopadhyay), or (much later) a novelist of the stature of Bhabani Bhattacharya, all of whom wrote in English. Dhangopal Mukherji (1879-1937), stylish poet and novelist, was born in Calcutta though he died in England, as did Sudhin Ghosh (1899-1965), who graduated in science from the University of Calcutta and published a tetralogy of novels with an unusual fantasy element, winning praise from the London *Times* as the foremost Indian novelist in English. And of course Nirad C. Choudhuri (1897-), whose nonfictional corpus includes his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* and *Thy Hand, Great Anarch*, both partly about Calcutta, lived in the city for many years before making Oxford his home.

After 1947 Calcutta remained the focus of Indian writing in English thanks chiefly to the

efforts of Writers Workshop, a small-scale publishing house that brought out the early works many of today's established authors: for example, volumes of poetry by Ruskin Bond, Keki Daruwalla, Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Shiv Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, Pritish Nandi, Vikram Seth and all the publications of P. Lal, the Workshop's founder. There are plays by Ezekiel, Nandi, G.V. Desani and Asif Currimbhoy, the last-named a prolific dramatist with such Calcutta-centric scripts as *Inquilab* (about the Naxalite movement) or *Sonar Bangla* (about the liberation of Bangladesh).

Many of these authors do not belong to Calcutta, others live or lived in the city – for instance Kamala Das, whose non-Workshop *Summer in Calcutta* recounts her experiences there.

The recent spurt in Indian-English fiction has not bypassed Calcutta. Anita Desai's early *Voices in the City* drew on her life there, but the younger novelists also reveal ties with the metropolis. Amitabha Ghosh, born and brought up in Calcutta, writes about it in *The Shadow Lines*; Bharati Mukherji takes pride in calling herself *Kalkatar meye* (a Calcutta girl); Vikram Seth was born in Calcutta; and Shashi Tharoor had his schooling in the city. Charnock's village continues to produce eminently accomplished writers in Charnock's mother tongue.



THE CALCUTTA ADDA



Pratap Kumar Ray

Dilipkumar Ray quotes an account of Shahed Suhrawardy's student days in Paris. When asked what most distinguished a Bengali, the eminent scholar and art critic replied without hesitation: the *adda*.

Something so quintessentially Bengali is difficult to explain to the world. The word *adda* exists in other Indian languages, but without its unique Bengali connotations. It is a long talking session, commonly of a recurrent sort among friends or co-activists. It is not simply conversation, or discussion, or debate, or gossip; and yet it is all these. It ranges over a variety of subjects: war theatre, or Hindu philosophy, or why Bengali Brahmins eat fish. It is certainly not *idle* gossip, as the participants are usually well-informed and witty; but what is it if not fundamentally idle or unproductive? A non-Bengali friend once observed to me that many *adda*-addicts might have been successful writers if they had not exhausted their creative energy in talk. He also said he admired how, at all levels of Bengali life, the problems of the world are constantly debated and solved through discussion. This proves beyond question how imperfectly the outsider understands the Bengali *adda*.

Adda is not unknown elsewhere in embryonic form. The European in his café pub or beer-cellar, the Turk or Egyptian with his cup of coffee among friends, show feeble

yearnings towards the pursuit. But apparently the drink is more important to them than the talk. Nor, we are told on authority, do they debate such matters as the existence of God or Victorian influence on African society.

The *adda* is not a club. We claim *addas* existed before the British invented the club. Unlike the latter, the *adda* survives because it is disorganized and has no rules. It has no office bearers, no dress regulations, no agenda and no fees. A group of men – no *adda* I know of before the second half of this century admitted women – simply form a conversational circle. They do not frame a constitution, put up a sign or publish proceedings. Hence you cannot know of an *adda's* existence unless you belong to it.

The origin of the *adda* seems to lie in the village gathering at day's end at the *chandimandap*, the venue of rustic meetings and festivals. Here under the sway of the village elders, problems were discussed, sometimes solved and more often aggravated. The principal motive at this stage does appear to have been gossip.

In towns and cities, *addas* grew in every locality, chiefly as places for killing time by those who had that commodity in plenty. In Calcutta little clusters of young men (and sometimes older ones) gathered on a *rowak* – the ledge or narrow platform outside a dwelling-house, now vanishing under the onslaught of modern architecture. The youths

were usually unemployed; but when they acquired jobs, the *adda* did not pack up. They would still meet at the appointed place at the appointed hour. *Adda* was in their culture, in their blood.

The neighbourhood *addas* were harmless: voices were raised but without rancour, perhaps because the issues discussed were seldom capable of settlement. But the elder generation viewed such *addas* with disapproval. College canteens afforded a freer haven for the *addas* of one's youth. We used to have one in Raymashai's canteen at Presidency College. Raymashai, the elderly but genial proprietor, gave us long credit and joined like one of our own age in the debates on football or cinema or eroticism in Scandinavian literature. How much such *addas* involved the skipping of classes I need not say.

The *addas* that are Calcutta's pride belong to the same genre raised to supreme power. They are predominantly literary, or at least cultural and intellectual. Even the radical Gopal Halder showed his appreciation of the type when he named a collection of essays (on *adda* among other subjects) *Adda*.

It is something of a mystery why creative writers have been so much the dominant group in these inspiring, vitalizing, brain-storming sessions. Or perhaps it is merely that the literati give prominence to their *addas* by writing about them. The *adda* that grew up around the magazine *Kallol* is celebrated largely owing to Achintyakumar Sengupta's *Kallol Jug*.

37.1 Tea-table *adda* :
Abanindranath
Thakur, Satyaprasad
Ganguli and
Samarendranath
Thakur



Lawyers, doctors, engineers or executives might join such an *adda*, but they remain a minority. They have exclusive *addas* within their professional circles; but these are rumoured to degenerate into bridge clubs or drinking sessions.

The classic literary *adda* centred round a journal. The members met with the ostensible intent of selecting material or providing a think-tank. In actual fact, all subjects under the sun were freely and fiercely discussed. I remember attending an *adda* at the office of *Shanibarar Chithi*. Tulsi Lahiri, the actor and playwright, was explaining the intricacies of cross-examination in a case of rape. Soon the subject changed to the use of slang in literature. I had left before it changed again.

The *Kallol adda*, in fact, continued through the day, people drifting in and out and staying as long as it suited them. They included the progressive writers of the time: Premendra Mitra, Shailajananda Mukherji, Tarashankar Banerji, Nazrul Islam. Another such *adda* grew up around Pramatha Choudhuri's *Sabujpatra*. The conservatives set up a counter-*adda* at *Shanibarar Chithi*: here came Mohitlal Majumder, Sajanikanta Das, Parimal Goswami, Brajendranath Banerji and Bibhutibhushan Banerji. Nirad C. Choudhuri was the editor of *Shanibarar Chithi* at one time, but I have never heard that he participated in its *adda*. He was however a regular at the *adda* at the *Prabasi* office, according to Parimal Goswami. I also note with relief that the great iconoclast has said nothing disparaging about *adda* in his book *Atmaghati Bangali* ('The Self-Destroying Bengali').

The *Parichay adda* was a more sedate affair. The magazine was conceived by serious men and its well-wishers came from various disciplines. But the subjects of discussion were still far-flung and often bizarre. Shyamalkrishna Ghosh has given us glimpses of it from his diary in his book *Nairobi thekey Rabi*. Pramatha Choudhuri came sometimes to the *Parichay adda*, and the scientist Satyendranath Basu nearly always. (He was once described by Hirankumar Sanyal as 'the greatest *addabaji*'.) Another regular was Humphry House, then professor at Presidency College. There were also several Indian Oxonians: Hiren Mukherji, Tulsi Goswami, Sushobhan Sarkar, Humayun Kabir and Shahed Suhrawardy. Malcolm Muggeridge,



37.2 The Monday Club. Sitting (from left) : Sukumar Ray, Jibanmay Ray, Subinay Ray, Sunitikumar Chatterji and unknown. Standing (from left) : Shishirkumar Datta, Ajitkumar Chakrabarti, Hirankumar Sanyal, unknown, unknown, Dwijen Maitra, Kalidas Nag, Atulprasad Sen, Prashanta Mahalanabish and unknown

Assistant Editor of *The Statesman* at the time, joined occasionally; but he was a Cambridge man. Over the whole ménage presided the crudite poet-editor Sudhindranath Datta. Jamini Ray was another active participant.

As this indicates, the Bengali *adda* does not really approximate to Shakespeare's Mermaid Tavern. It is perhaps closer to Dr. Johnson's circle, which men like Burke and William Pitt often came to attend. Or else we may compare the *Kallol* circle with the Bloomsbury Group, though without the latter's strong dash of bohemianism.

A quieter and less youthful *adda* would be held at M.C. Sarkar's, the booksellers and publishers. Sudhirschandra Sarkar organized the *adda* as a talking-point for contributors to his children's magazine *Mouchak*. The regular visitors included Kedarnath Chatterji, Tusharkanti Ghosh, Makhanlal Sen, Achintyakumar Sengupta and Manoj Basu. Even Sharatchandra used to come in the early days. Sudhirschandra himself kept a low profile, as did Gajendranath Ghosh, who offered his house and supplied endless cups of tea for the *adda* of the *Bharati* group.

More recent nostalgia may be roused by memories of the *addas* at the *Desh* office with Sagarmay Ghosh presiding, or the magazine

section of the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* under Ramapada Choudhuri. As newspapers get bigger, the scope for *adda* in their offices is slowly fading out. *Adda* cannot flourish in a disciplined environment, with a receptionist checking in visitors and computer technology all round.

Not all *addas*, even literary ones, centre round a magazine. There would be one at Girindrashekhar Basu's house which even had a name – Utkendra Samiti (the Eccentric Society, 'eccentric' being used in the mathematical or astronomical sense) – and which Rajshekhar Basu ('Parashuram') visited regularly. Although a master-humorist, Rajshekhar was a serious and methodical person whom one would not conceive of as wasting time in *adda*. Did he find that it refreshed him for the serious pursuits of life? Or provided material for his humorous stories?

An *adda* with a name has of course taken the first step towards formality. One stage further stood Sukumar Ray's Monday Club, which even had a four-anna subscription. Luckily such rigour does not seem to have cramped the style of the members, which included Satyendranath Datta, Sunitikumar Chatterji, Prabhatkumar Ganguli, Amal Hom and Prashantachandra Mahalanabish.



37.3 Old men at the
Dhakuria Lakes

Of later *addas*, not centring round a magazine but pure and pristine, the most noteworthy are those at the two Coffee Houses, on College Street and Chittaranjan Avenue. The latter – somewhat misleadingly termed the Chourangi Coffee House – was once frequented by Satyajit Ray. Aneurin Bevan was once brought to it. I had occasion to participate regularly in the lunch-time sessions here. In particular, I recall a very lively *adda* with Subho Thakur raising a controversy about art appreciation.

We have always thought of the *adda* as a male stronghold. It was therefore with interest that I read a recent article on women's *addas*. I had seen in my boyhood how, the morning chores over, the women of the neighbourhood gathered in the early afternoon to exchange and discuss news. The subjects were rather limited in those pre-emancipation days: good-humoured or malicious gossip, family problems and the menu for lunch. My

grandmother was forever reading Kaliprasanna Sinha's translation of the *Mahabharata*, and would often draw epic parallels to current events. I also remember the fervent debate over the Bhawal Sanyasi case, some ladies siding with the sadhu claiming to be the returned Raja of Bhawal, others with the Rani contesting his claim. The ferocity of partisanship was matched only by what I later saw in football *addas* between East Bengal and Mohan Bagan fans.

The article also mentioned a female *adda* that was doubly special in being held, every weekday morning and evening, in the ladies' compartment of a suburban train. The range of discussion has widened greatly today – but the lack of domestic help looms sadly large in the list of topics.

Talking of novel forms of *adda*, I must mention one recorded by Sudhirchandra Sarkar in his memoirs. This was a walking *adda*: the members would walk up to a friend's house and walk back, talking the while, and ending up at a teashop at the starting-point. Something of the sort may be seen among morning-walkers, especially old and retired gentlemen, at the Dhakuria Lakes and city parks each morning and evening.

Has such pervasive precedent affected non-Bengali Calcuttans as well? A good many of them, mostly businessmen, can be seen taking their early morning constitutional on the Maidan near the Victoria Memorial. Before leaving for home, they often form small groups and discuss business and politics for a leisurely half-hour. Maybe they are really talking business, even pumping each other for gainful information. Or maybe they have caught the genuine spirit of *adda*, which is never held for a gainful purpose. A Bengali *adda*, one imagines, never will be.

CALCUTTA IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE

Subho Ranjan Dasgupta

I: POETRY

In an interpolated passage in Bipradas Pipal's *Manasamangal Kabya*, Chand the merchant sails down the Ganga or Bhagirathi:

*Avoiding Kalikata on the eastern bank
The great hero Chand wrongly loads his boat.*

The poem dates from c.1495; the interpolation is presumably post-Charnock. Today's merchants seem to follow Chand's example by drifting with their capital to other climes. But the city's poets have not been much bothered by this capricious cycle of mercantile love and neglect.

In earlier times, indeed, they chanted the grandeur of the imperial city with a simple wonder and delight. Here is Rupchand Pakshi from the late nineteenth century:

*Praise be to Calcutta,
Heaven's elder brother,
Incomparable on earth!
And Purandar [Indra, the King of the Gods] says,
'Father! Help!'
When he sees the telegraph
And hides in shame.*

Later on, poets mourned the city's decline with a fervour that reminds one of Horace's laments over Rome. But basically, always, the poet's eye has penetrated the passing phases of the city's worldly state to its sustainedly divided

psyche, its mingled attraction and repulsion, exaltation and despair.

Baldeb Palit (1835-1900) presented the paradox directly and modestly some hundred years ago:

*At last, before my very eyes, Calcutta,
Capital of India under British rule!
Wherever I turn I see
Brick, brick, brick and more brick.*

In the twentieth century, Samar Sen's (1916-87) dramatic evocation in 'Farewell to Heaven' (*Swarga Hatey Biday*) presents essentially the same compund. Here the poet is not merely a visitor or looker-on; he is totally absorbed in the city, and his lines echo the simultaneous heart-beat of both:

*O city, O ashen city.
Urbashi [the celestial courtesan] is hired for a few hours
for ten rupees,
And when she dances in the crowd of hungry men
The ecstasy in her sari and in country-liquor
Intoxicates the souls of the heaven-born.
The bloodstream dances
And on the horizon rises the burning moon:
O city, O ashen city.*

In the next generation Shakti Chatterji (1933-), urban minstrel incomparable, has

38.1 Samar Sen





openly merged his grief with the city's own in 'Sorrow' (*Dukkha*):

*If the poet is sad, Calcutta is sad as well,
Yet all say, she is the cruellest ...
I know she feels sad, endlessly weeps in grief.
Place your ears once on your heart –
At midnight on a lonely road place your ears –
You will hear someone weep ...
As if a cloud is rumbling from a cavern below.*

More obliquely, Alokranjan Dasgupta (1933–) assimilates Calcutta's composite psyche to his creative process, identifies his metre with the metropolis in 'Fog all over the City' (*Sara Shahar Jurey Kuasha*):

*This fog all over this city
By pitching a huge tent
Forcibly takes away my language.
But you reject my silence,
You give me a pen after lighting the lamp.*

*When I try to grasp this fog
With the five-beat rhythm
Of a wordless mantra,
A six-beat fog tears open my tent.*

38.2 Shakti Chatterji

38.3 Alokranjan
Dasgupta

The city and its fog rob the poet of his language; but then another more powerful pressure rips apart the veil, and words emerge.

Poets from other lands have also come to listen to the city's heartbeat, to phrase memorable evocations of the anomaly that is Calcutta. Günter Grass, who has paid more than one visit, has written: 'How shall I describe my experience, it is like Saul's journey through Damascus.' The city's intrinsic dialectics are brought out in a dazed but vibrant prose-poem:

See Calcutta and go on living. Meet your Damascus in Calcutta. ... In Calcutta, encoffined in a mosquito net, dream of Calcutta. ... Get a composer to set all the projects for clearing up Calcutta to music and have the resulting oratorio (sung by a Bach Society) open in Calcutta. Develop a new dialectic from Calcutta's contradictions. Transfer the UN to Calcutta. (From *Der Butt*, 'The Flounder').

Unsatisfied by his first brief encounter, Grass returned and lived here for almost a year. No wonder then that the city's native poets should cling to it, suffer, deepen their bonds of hard-won love.

In the process, Calcutta itself emerges as a character. Even Rabindranath Thakur (Ta-

gore), who was never an urban poet in the true sense of the term, responded to the city in an ambiguous manner. Perhaps the disjointed and broken rhythms of urban life was one of the factors that prompted him to break out of traditional metres and attempt the then innovative medium of free verse. *Punashcha*, the book which consolidated this new start, included in its second edition (1934) the pathbreaking city poem 'The Flute' (*Banshi*), which had earlier appeared in *Parishesh* (1933). Rabindranath's sharp eye and fresh diction challenged the moderns on their own ground in a vivid city sketch that remains valid to this day:

*The lane is littered
With rotting mango peels, jackfruit kernels
Scraps of fishbones
Dead kittens
All kinds of rubbish. . .*

In this setting, the archetypal clerk struggles with his bleak surroundings:

*Pay: twenty-four rupees,
A junior clerk in a mercantile office ..
My umbrella is full of holes,
Like my pay, after they've cut the fines.*

He is sustained by a lyrical antithesis to this scene, contrasting memories of his native countryside and self-aborted romance. His recollections raise him to a meditative ecstasy in the midst of his squalor:

*Sometimes in the depths of night
Sometimes in the glittering twilight chiaroscuro.
Suddenly in the evening
The Sindhu-Baroan raga...
The Dhaleshwari flows,
Between the tamal trees, throwing deep shadows.*

But the clerk had fled the village of his own accord. The country and the city are equal realities in his life: the city provided an escape from the set certainties of his village life, even as memories of the country provide him with solace in the city. He is essentially different from Samar Sen's rootless men and women: he inhabits an aesthetic universe where the dreary Calcutta sky is infused with 'the eternal sorrow of parted lovers'.

Rabindranath's view of the city has progressed from that in 'The Bride' (*Badhu*), composed in 1888 and published in *Manasi* (1890). Here the country bride, now incarcerated in the city,

merely clings to the memories of happy village life. She feels destined to return to the dark waters of the village lake: death-wish as much as nostalgia, an ambivalent escape from a city built of 'brick', with 'human insects' grubbing between them.

Later Jibanananda Das (1899-1954), who left the picturesque landscape of rural Bengal to find a troubled niche in the city, could not easily return to the land he had left behind. Preparing the way for Samar Sen and many others, he entered the wretched soul of his new home, and came up with images terrifying in their actuality. This is from 'The Night' (Ratri):

*The leper licks water from the hydrant
Or perhaps the hydrant is broken.
Now midnight crowds upon the city:
A car passes with a foolish cough. . .*

This infernal midnight invites comparison with the primeval forest; but the pristine savagery is combined with sophisticated duplicity in the metropolitan jungle:

*Midnight in the city reminds him
Of the Libyan forests.
Even so, the animals are unique.
Giving more than their money's worth.
In fact, they wear clothes to cover their shame.*

Obviously, a transformation has occurred. The modern generation begun by Jibanananda and his contemporaries is no longer in a position to beat a romantic retreat from the city's realities. Rabindranath's clerk Haripada has given way to another breed – uprooted, alienated, even dehumanized – who can only stutter faltering, even ironically-expressed hopes like the now proverbial 'Calcutta, one day, will be a vibrant Tilotama' (Jibanananda Das, *Suchetana*). Tilotama's legendary beauty was created by piling up components the size of sesame seeds. Such patient hope for the city is almost akin to despair.

Jibanananda set the tenor of future lyric responses to the city. He underscored the estrangement of the poet rooted to Calcutta and the simultaneous agonized intimacy that flowered from such very alienation. Premendra Mitra (1904-88) uttered a discordant prayer for the city in an untitled poem:

*Receive on your head today,
O my city,*

*The dawn's blessing,
On your tangled, dust-and-smoke-bejewelled head.
Folding your hands,
Machine-stabbed, blood-and-ink-stained,
Bow to the morning,
Tearing with both hands the mist-bound, nightmare set.*

Bishnu Dey's (1909-82) *Chourangi* sketched everyday scenes of futility with a visionary intensity of detail:

*In the nerves forest-fearing primeval cries well up.
In cinema halls, cafés, shops, lanes, highway crossings,
Millions of Raktabeej jaundiced men go about
Fatally cursed, all scattered, sick for unity.
Perhaps Kamsa's chariot approaches and the earth quakes.*
(Translated by the poet)

The Raktabeej are demons born from the blood of their own kind. The impending Apocalypse seems to bear within it the seeds of a terrifying revival. Nor is this inferno without its latent chants, be it Premendra Mitra's prayer or Bishnu Dey's 'primeval cries'. Elsewhere, more clearly, Bishnu Dey is impelled to seek the city's redemption. In 'A Page of Queries' (*Prashnapatra*), his 'mind wanders away to the far sky/And the wind and the plenty of the fields', draws sustenance and returns with determination:

*It knows that to our intense birdsong
The world claps with a thousand pairs of happy hands.
Is that why I search for her day and night?
Must the two of us remake Calcutta?*

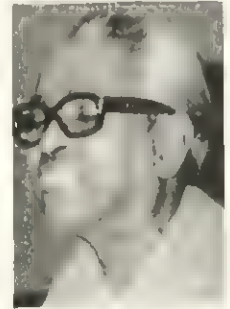
When Jibanananda dreamt of Calcutta's rejuvenation, he sought its correlative in the enigmatic cities of ancient civilization as in *Banalata Sen*. Bishnu Dey thinks rather of directly, actively 'remaking' the city, in a collective spirit that is Marxian in its basic conception.

The bond between the poet and the city seems forged with the intensity of a dialectical relationship. The deeper the distaste, the more ardent the attraction. The most vehement condemnation coexists with the most heartfelt invocation. The dominant motif may often appear to be repulsion or censure alone: perhaps starkly imagist as in Dinesh Das's (1913-85) poem *Kalkata* :

*Calcutta is a black snake:
The tail writhing in the Lake [i.e., the Dhakuria Lakes]
The head on Haora Bridge...*

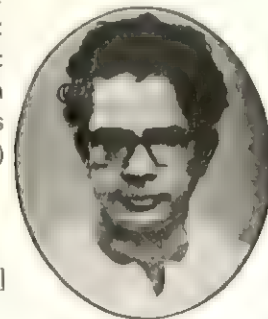


38.4 Jibanananda Das



38.5 Dinesh Das

38.6 Premendra Mitra



JESUS OF CALCUTTA

The red lights did not forbid,
Yet the city of Calcutta stopped suddenly
in its tempestuous rush ;
taxi and private cars : vans and tiger-crested
double decker buses
stopped precariously in their tracks.
Those who came running and screaming
from both sides of the road—
porters, vendors, shopkeepers and clients—
even they are now like still life
on the artist's canvas.
Stunned they watch
crossing from one side of the road
to the other, with uncertain steps,
a child, completely naked.
It had rained in Chowringhee a short
while ago.
Now the sunlight has pierced the heart
of the clouds
and is descending like an overlong shaft :
Calcutta shines with an eerie glow.
I sit next to the bus window
and look at the sky and you :
the child of a beggar-mother.
Jesus of Calcutta,
you have mesmerised all traffic to a stop.
You pay no heed as the crowd howls and
the drivers impatiently gnash their teeth.
You walk uncertainly
between the eager jaws of death.
As if you ate the essential man,
in the pleasure of your first steps
you want to grasp the whole world.
So you march unsteadily from one end
of the world to the other.

: By Nirendra Nath Chakrabarti
: Translated by Manish Nandy
: Issued by the Corporation of Calcutta

38.7 Corporation
advertisement
illustrating
Nirendranath
Chakrabarti's Jesus of
Calcutta

More expansively, Buddhadeb Basu (1908-74) places a stormlashed city – twinned to his desolated self – in a bleak setting of rain and thunder that asserts nothing but the barrenness of it all. The poem itself is called 'Rain and Storm' (*Brishti o Jhar*) :

Night, emptiness in room, darkness outside,
Rain and storm, rain and storm.
Empty, empty heart, futile futile night :
Only the sleepless rumble of the angry city.

Subhash Mukherji (1919–) reworks the gentle

metre and wistful refrain of Rabindranath's 'The Bride' to splendid ironic effect in a poem of the same title :

*On the lane the evening slowly falls,
The hawkers cry their old tunes on the way
The radio in the distance spreads a dream
The burning gas marks the end of day.*

Subhash's bride, like Rabindranath's, recalls the joy and harmony of village life and contrasts it with the city's stony-hearted mercantilism, where estrangement is the only abiding reality. But the romanticism is now studied, detached, wry, even tongue-in-cheek in its use of the trappings of traditional lyric.

Nirendranath Chakrabarti (1924–) visualizes in literal terms the impact of the modern lyric, explosions of the mind that reflect and recreate the volatility of city life. As his title 'Poetry '70' (*Kabita Sattar*) indicates, his immediate context is the turmoil of twenty years ago.

*Assaults and fear rise everywhere
Some poems explode in Chourangi
Trees shake to their roots, fearstruck birds
In droves fly out in the sky.*

Yet in the same city, love is struck out from the streets and pavements. In one of his most famous poems, Nirendranath presents a naked beggar's child, 'Jesus of Calcutta' (*Kalkatar Jishu*) halting the monstrous tide of traffic as he serenely crosses the road. Hence the poet too finds himself compelled to return 'To You Calcutta' (*Tomaakey Kalkata*):

*I roam far and wide, again come near
I love for the sake of love,
What else?
Like a fool I have concealed this fact
In Calcutta.*

The poet is self-sentenced by his passion for life in Calcutta. He cannot fly, like Nirendranath's birds, when the city turns explosive. He can only console himself like Sunil Ganguli in 'Calcutta and I' (*Kalkata ebang Ami*) by calling it a city of memories. When this slight solace also burns out, he bursts into a fit of suicidal rage:

*I'll strangle you –
Fling gunpowder in the drains of your body ...
I'll light a match –
The palaces will fall, the bricks and wood crackle.*

All the graces, jewels, the immortal Chitpur world
Will dissolve.
Since you have pushed me towards death,
What can prevent you from sharing my fate?

The inflamed words mark the culmination of a relationship between poet and city: a destructive end, a climax, that counterpoints other reflective utterances where the anger is softened or even erased by other emotions.

Shankha Ghosh (1932-), for instance, finds himself enveloped by a mysterious quietude, transient but not too elusive, in *Red Road*:

I lie under the open sky – on the Maidan's loins –
.. As if the star plucks up my solitary breath.
My soundless psalm, from the depth of this dark ethos,
Rises, as if in cluster, towards the heavenly ether.

Or else the persistent recall of memory can spread a balm over the 'broken dreams' of Farapada Ray (1936-) in 'Do You Remember, Calcutta' (Maney Parey Kalkata):

That thrill of mine, my dream city,
The first tramcar in my life, the first 'First Class',
First-class Calcutta,
On every roof a pet cloud,
In every window a chiaroscuro memory...

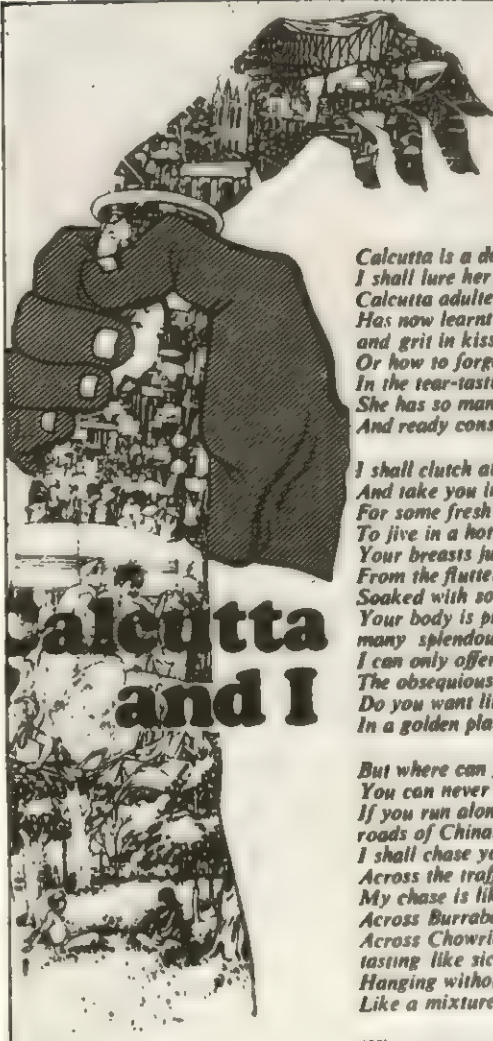
A more disturbing passivity is evoked in Phanibhushan Acharya's symbolic poem 'The Dying Courtesan' (*Mumurshu Nayika*), where the lovers of the city helplessly watch her dissolution:

Oranges,
Skins of grapes
And skeletons of pomegranates
Litter the four sides of her deathbed.
We her lovers at different times
Like ghost figures sit unmoving
Our heads crosswise on our chests.

But there can also be a placid acceptance, an unquestioning bedrock optimism voiced in unruffled diction by Pranabendu Dasgupta (1936-) in 'Somewhere at Least' (*Kothao na kothao*):

The dear myna tape-records set speeches of men
Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hare Hare
Somewhere, in this strange city –
Everything is right.

We may tellingly let a poet from another land



Calcutta and I

Calcutta is a deadweight round my neck—
I shall lure her to Haldia,
Calcutta adulterates moonlight,
Has now learnt how to mix cactus
and grit in kiss
Or how to forget mixing sugar
In the tear-tasting liquor of tea.
She has so many paramours round the clock
And ready consent in her loins.

I shall clutch at your arms, Calcutta.
And take you in a taxi
For some fresh air;
To live in a hotel
Your breasts jut like cameras
From the fluttering end of the sari;
Soaked with so much lili,
Your body is precious and
many splendoured.
I can only offer you
The obsequiousness of pure poetry.
Do you want lilies
In a golden plate for both your hands?

But where can you escape from my clutches
You can never hide in Canning Street—
If you run along the crumbling
roads of Chinatown
I shall chase you like a tiger
Across the traffic lights;
My chase is like an ethereal soul
Across Burrabazar of many sorrows
Across Chowringhee
tasting like sickman's diet
Hanging without a support;
Like a mixture of sick love and vengeance.

Where can you find refuge, Calcutta?
I shall turn round all the ships on the Ganga.
I shall focus their giant searchlights
On the darkness of Maidan;
I shall then smother you in my arms.

from Sunil Gangopadhyay

The Corporation and the life of Calcutta

have the last word – for the same feeling of calm, which does not negate agitation but sublimates it, seems to strengthen the ending of Günter Grass's *prosa* on Calcutta. In a surprisingly tranquil tone that contrasts sharply with the vibrancy of his earlier description, Grass concludes: 'When they were in the city, she was shocked, he no longer. He blossomed ... he wrote and drew, drew and wrote.'

This poignant, challenging, agonizing call to creativity is what Calcutta has always held out to her poets.

38.8 Corporation advertisement illustrating Sunil Ganguli's *Calcutta and I*

Sudesna Chakrabarti

II: FICTION

If we take the nineteen-thirties as our starting-point, how does Calcutta appear in fiction? There are, of course, several aspects. Calcutta was viewed as a place of exile or at best temporary residence, by mess dwellers coming from villages or suburban towns to work in the city. Their loneliness, their longing for the families they could not afford to bring to the city, and at the same time a certain fascination with city life, are portrayed in several novels and short stories. The theme recurs from 'Chitrangada and the First Book' (*First Book O Chitrangada*) by Manoj Basu (1901-87) to a recent story, 'The Question' (*Jignasa*) by Soumitra Lahiri. The romantic side of mess life appeared in the Satish-Sabitri love affair as long ago as in Sharatchandra Chatterji's famous novel 'The Libertine' (*Charitrahin*).

Sometimes there was a variation on the theme: a family coming to Calcutta with high hopes discovers the bitter reality of the city, which either destroys them or drives them back to the safe if drab shelter of the village. This is the theme of various short stories, such as 'I was Quite Well' (*Bhalo Chhilam*) by Ashapurna Devi (1909-) and 'The Moth and the Lamp' (*Pradip o Prajapati*) by Narayan Ganguli (1918-70).

Other aspects of city life, particularly the darker side, also drew literary attention. The working classes and the criminal classes, the proletariat and the lumpen proletariat in and around Calcutta had provided material for writers since the rise of the *Kallol* group in the 1920s. Their attitudes ranged from romantic sympathy and melodramatic sensationalism to political analysis and exhortation. 'Suburb' (*Shahartali*), a novel by the famous leftist novelist Manik Banerji (1908-56) portrays a working-class slum on the outskirts of Calcutta. Jashoda, the heroine, the guiding spirit of the community, was perhaps modelled on Gorky's Mother, though she is far from being a romantic figure. Another novel by Manik, 'A Tale of City Life' (*Shahar Baser Itikatha*) relates

the experience of villagers from different classes who have succumbed to the lure of Calcutta. Mohan, the rich landlord who came to seek the pleasure, variety and intellectual stimulation of city life, is disappointed and disoriented. His two companions have been driven there by economic necessity. Pitambar becomes a mud-dleman or tout, while Sripati, the village blacksmith, is transformed into an industrial worker. Gradually the personal bond between the three is dissolved and they are absorbed into the stream of city life.

White-collar groups were also portrayed with sympathy and penetration. For example, 'Following' (*Anubartan*), a novel by Bibhutibhushan Banerji (1894-1950), gives an unforgettable account of a Calcutta school and its seedy, down-and-out teachers, on the eve of the Second World War.

The underworld of the lumpen proletariat, criminals, beggars and prostitutes fascinated many writers. The writers of the *Kallol* group and many others tried their hand at this kind of fiction. 'The Song of Pataldanga' (*Pataldangar Panchali*) by Manish Ghatak (1902-79), a collection of loosely-knit stories portraying criminal gangs in the city, is a striking example of the genre. Premendra Mitra (1904-88), in some of his short stories concerning the night life of Calcutta, raises everyday reality to the level of fantasy. This is particularly noticeable in 'The Great City' (*Mahanagar*) and 'The Arabian Nights of Calcutta' (*Kalkatar Arabya Rajani*).

The Second World War did not directly affect Calcutta, a few air raids apart. But the bombing scare that drove away thousands, the black-out, air-raid warnings, and above all the great famine of 1943 that killed millions and drove hordes of desperate, starving villagers into the city – all these left a permanent scar on the Bengali psyche. The novels and stories portraying Calcutta during those nightmare days are too numerous to describe in detail. There followed shortly the trauma of bloody communal riots. Independence turned to ashes



because of the Partition of the country and, over the years, a flood of refugees from East Bengal. Calcutta became many things: a city of nightmares, a city of processions, a scarred, tormented city with a kind of tragic grandeur. Nor was it simply a saga of passive suffering. The mid-forties were marked by massive demonstrations for the release of political prisoners. The fledgeling Communist party was extremely active, even if at times disastrously adventurist; and the Tebhaga, though essentially a peasant movement, spilled over into the city to some extent.

Some of the best Bengali fiction belongs to this period and was inspired directly or indirectly by these events. The streets of Calcutta, reeking of corpses and the blood of fratricidal struggle relieved by occasional acts of heroism, assumed a mythical dimension in these novels and stories. Manik Banerji in his 'Tale of City Life' or 'Tale of a Puppet Dance' (*Putul Nacher Itikatha*) shows Calcutta as a distant glittering ideal for benighted villagers. In his later novels and short stories, Calcutta becomes a bitter yet vital and palpitating reality. Some of the stories show the psychological disintegration of middle-class urban families under the impact of the war scare and the famine, even if they are not directly affected. In one of these stories, 'He Who Saves, He Who is Saved' (*Je Banchay, Je Banchey*) the middle-class hero is obsessed with the famine till he identifies himself with its victims and actually joins the queue for charity. Tarashankar Banerji's (1898-1971) novel 'Famine' (*Manwantar*) and some of his short stories portray Calcutta in the throes of the famine, though perhaps the uneasy coexistence of Gandhism and Marxism at this phase in the author's development mars the effect of his writing somewhat.

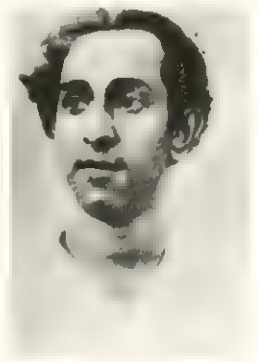
The massive anti-British demonstrations and upheavals that marked the immediate aftermath of the war inspired Tarashankar's novel 'The Storm and Fallen Leaves' (*Jhar, Jhara Pata*) and Manik's 'The Mark' (*Chinha*). The riots and the simultaneous attempts to restore communal harmony appear in another novel by Manik, 'The Taste of Freedom' (*Swadhinatar Swad*). In all these and numerous other works, Calcutta appears not merely as the background but as a living character in the plot, an active participant in the struggle. Deepayan, the hero of Sanjay Bhattacharya's (1909-69) novel 'Creation' (*Srishti*) describing the political process of the

thirties and forties with Calcutta as its centre, expresses doubts about the worth of city life: 'What does the city give us? What do we get there? We only give away ourselves – and receive nothing in return.' Yet on Independence Day, he declares, 'Calcutta became a bright festive site and called to us again'.

Calcutta in post-Independence and post-Partition days was hardly a 'bright festive site', despite her attractions. The refugee problem ate at the heart of the city's existence. Migrant labourers from other parts of India added to the burden. The late forties and early fifties were marked by violent struggles and upheavals, even though of a scattered nature, before the Communist Party became 'respectable'. All this, too, found its way into fiction. Sometimes the heritage of the war seemed to continue. In a short story by Narayan Ganguli, 'The Renegade' (*Bibhishan*), the action takes place against the backdrop of narrow streets where darkness has continued ever since the era of air raids and curfews. The setting reinforces the grim theme – the treachery of a worker who is forced by circumstances to betray his mates.

Another theme that received considerable attention was the effect of the political movements, riots, Partition etc. on the women of the city. Sanjay Bhattacharya's Deepayan asks his girl friend: 'The famine, war and riots showed that the lives of women are of little worth. Do you want to go on enduring this curse, this injustice? Do you not want freedom?' In fact, in a bitter, warped fashion, the great calamities did help the cause of female emancipation. Social disorganization and economic necessity broke down old barriers and taboos. Mani, the heroine of Manik's 'The Taste of Freedom', is an ordinary middle-aged housewife induced by the upheaval all around her to venture outside the narrow circle of personal and family interests. In the same novel, a maidservant, who is not above selling her body on the side, heads a procession demanding communal unity, while Mani's daughter takes part in a political demonstration and is wounded.

Ashapura Debi's novel 'The Mitra Family' (*Mittir Bari*) shows the breakdown of traditional prejudices in a conservative family of old Calcutta under the impact of the riots and the consequent liberation of its womenfolk. Refugee families from East Bengal were forced to let their womenfolk work, when such work was available or possible, even though the old



Facing page :
38.9 Ashapura Debi

Above :
38.10 Sanjay
Bhattacharya

Below
38.11 Narayan
Ganguli



Above
38.12 *The hunted Naxalite* in a film by
Mrinal Sen

Below
38.13 Mahashweta
Debi

strictures against working women did not entirely disappear.

The conflict between current necessity and old prejudices is admirably portrayed in a novel by Narendranath Mitra (1917-75), *'The Great City'* (*Mahanagar*), subsequently made into a film by Satyajit Ray. The heroine Arati copes single-handed with the battle of life in the great city, the pressure of work and the hostility of her own family. In the end the city seems to defeat her; yet there is nobility in her last, almost suicidal gesture. The novel touches lightly on another problem, the position of the Anglo-Indian community in post-Independence Calcutta. It is to defend an Anglo-Indian friend that Arati gives up her much-needed job.

After a decade or so of peace if not prosperity, Calcutta exploded again in the mid-sixties. Food riots were followed by the attempts of the newly-formed Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) to carry out an armed revolution. This abortive rising, popularly known as the Naxalite movement, had a profound effect on literature. Works of fiction poured from writers hostile or sympathetic to the movement and, in some cases, from the participants themselves. Although many of these novels and stories were set in the villages or districts, many others portrayed Calcutta, which became the centre of the struggle, particularly in its last throes.

Calcutta became a city of siege and bloodshed, divided into hostile neighbourhoods with different political loyalties. Tarashankar in his last work *'Calcutta '71'* (*Kolkata Ekattar*) compared the city, indeed the State, to a tree whose green leaves had been set on fire. To writers of a different political camp, the flame signified hope of a new life, though their later writings were touched by the despondency of defeat. Only a few of the works depicting Calcutta during this period can be cited. *'The Mother of 1084'* (*Hajar Churashir Ma*) by Mahashweta Debi (1926-) portrays those days of violence and hope from the viewpoint of the mother of one of the martyred young revolutionaries. The novel highlights one of the sensitive problems of the movement, the attempts to bridge the gap between fighters from the upper echelons of urban society and those belonging to the refugee colonies. *'Introduction to a Gangster Story'* (*Ekti Mastani Galper Bhumika*), a short story by Tapobijay Ghosh (1936-) draws attention to a growing phenomenon in the city, the gangs of local hoodlums. But the basic irony here is at the expense of politicians and businessmen who use and then discard the gangsters, and of writers who wish to produce cheap, sensational literature about criminal life without probing its depths. The background is the rising political temperature of the late sixties and early seventies. *'Bloody Spring'* (*Raktim Basanta*) by Sadhan Chatterji sympathetically portrays three young revolutionary prisoners, bleeding to death on the city streets while no one dares to help them. *'The Message'* (*Barta*), a story by Siddhartha Ghosh, shows young men painting slogans on walls and sealing them with their blood. As a city of dream or nightmare or both, the 'red citadel' was immortalized in fiction.

A different set of problems emerged a few years later, when the survivors were released from prison. They returned to the city, to neighbourhoods which had changed beyond recognition; and their welcome at home, in some cases, was less than warm. This aspect of Calcutta, seen through the eyes of activists returning home, appears in such stories as *'They Have Not Returned'* (*Ora Phereni*) by Dipankar Das or *'Ninety Days after Returning Home'* (*Phirey Esey Nabbui Din Parey*) by Shankar Sengupta. The city is marked by the passing of time, which sweeps away the past and makes the future uncertain.

Change indeed has been the keynote of Calcutta during the last decade or so. The city has grown at a dizzying pace, not always in the best way. Skyscrapers and multi-storeyed apartment blocks are fast replacing the old-style houses. The influx of luxury goods and a consumerist life-style are creating new patterns of life and leisure, generating new needs. Expensive housing is pushing the underprivileged out of the city or into the slums, while more and more land on the outskirts of the city is being devoured. Stories such as 'Spring in Salt Lake' (*Salt Lakey Basanta*) by Baridbaran Chakrabarti or *Registry* by Dipankar Das portray the phenomenon. A novel by Ramapada Choudhuri (1922-), 'The Lamp in the Sky' (*Akash Pradeep*), shows an apartment house for the super-rich coming up in a previously neglected area, marginalizing both the traditional middle-class inhabitants and the slum-dwellers.

Novels of epic dimension have been written about Calcutta. Bimal Mitra (1912-) in a series of novels – the most famous being 'King, Queen and Knave' (*Saheb Bibi Golam*) – has traced the history of Calcutta from the nineteenth century till the late nineteen-sixties. Samaresh Basu (1924-88) in his long novel 'Living Forever' (*Jug Jug Jiye*) has recounted the troubled, tormented, heroic period from the Second World War to the first Communist

rising, concentrating particularly on the industrial belt of Calcutta. Sunil Ganguly in such massive novels as 'That Time' (*Sei Samay*) or 'East and West' (*Purba Paschim*) has attempted to present the social and cultural history of Bengal from the nineteenth century to the present day, with Calcutta as the focus.

Apart from the total picture, a few streets or neighbourhoods in Calcutta have acquired almost mythic dimensions. An imaginary street, 'Kinu the Milkman's Lane' (*Kinu Golar Gali*) has been immortalized in a poem 'The Flute' (*Banshi*) by Rabindranath. Santoshkumar Ghosh (1920-85) wrote a novel with the same title, bringing to life the people who might inhabit such a quarter. *Canning Street*, a short story by Nani Bhoomik, portrays a different kind of neighbourhood and its special characteristics. Almost every community and profession of this cosmopolitan city has found its way into fiction. Some of the most varied and popular accounts are to be found in the best-selling works of 'Shankar' (Manishankar Mukherji, 1933-).

In the vast and varied literature dealing with Calcutta or set there, the heart of the city throbs with all its travails and achievements. In 'The New Nativity' (*Arek Jatak Kahini*) a short story by Satyapriya Ghosh, a refugee child is born in a railway station of Calcutta amidst a police raid. Will Calcutta too be reborn?



38.14 Bimal Mitra





ART AND ARTISTS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CALCUTTA



Tarun Mitra

Calcutta grew as a centre of British interests and, after 1773, as the capital of British India. Many European painters visited the city and a few even settled there. On the other hand, there was no indigenous princely court in Calcutta to provide patronage to artistic activities in the Indian tradition. While certain types of popular and folk art – most notably the *pats* of Kalighat – flourished here in the nineteenth century, they had only limited interaction with the formal art of the upper classes. In the 1880s and 1890s, Abanindranath Thakur (Tagore) carried out some work formally related to North Indian traditions of art, but this too was rather an exception. Until the end of the last century, artistic activities in Calcutta were largely European in style and inspiration.

A new movement – if one must put a date to it – began in 1896, when Ernest Binfield Havell joined as Principal of the Government Art School, founded in 1864. Havell, a converted orientalist, was so overwhelmed by the richness of Indian art that he stopped the teaching of European academic art altogether at the School. One need not doubt the sincerity of his neophyte zeal, or the soundness of his view that art teaching in India could not ignore its traditional cultural roots. But needless to say, many artists and art students reacted vehemently to the move, misconstruing it as a colonial conspiracy to debar Indian students from access

to European techniques and traditions

In 1897, the students of the Government Art School lodged a formal protest. Soon after, Ranadaprasad Gupta (?-1927) established the Jubilee Art Academy – which lasted till his death in 1927 – to teach European academic painting. Atul Basu (1898-1977), the famous portrait painter, studied here for some time. But after a few years, the Government Art School reintroduced training in the Western academic style.

In order to understand the nature and extent of art consciousness, patronage and clientele in Calcutta, we must look at the art societies as well as schools. In 1889, local British residents – mostly high government officials – formed the Calcutta Art Society; later, it also inducted members from the landed gentry of Bengal. Bengali artists and professionals inaugurated the Indian Association for the Promotion of Fine Arts and National Gallery in 1892: among the founder-members were Upendrakishore Raychoudhuri (1863-1915), self-taught artist and printer, and Annadaprasad Bagchi (1849-1905), the well-known artist. Unfortunately, the organization did not last long. The Indian Art School, founded the same year, still maintains a somewhat precarious existence.

At the start of the century, patriotism gave a new creative impetus to the Bengali mind. For obvious historical reasons, Calcutta became the focal point of that impetus. In 1905 – the year of



the proposed Partition of Bengal – The Bangiya Kala Parishad (Bengal Art Society) was formed by the artists of Bengal. It was short-lived: nationalism alone could not unite their divergent ideologies. More successful was the Indian Society of Oriental Art, founded in 1907 by a combination of British orientalist with people like Ananda Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita, Kakuzo Okakura and Ardhendukumar ('O.C.') Ganguli. Surendranath Thakur, the patriot and social worker, joined the Society, hoping to forge a national cultural identity by its means. His cousin Abanindranath was the first secretary, and the latter's brother Gaganendranath a member. But even here, some of the ideologues of national culture became apprehensive of the support of the colonialists, and formed a separate organization called Bichitra in 1912.

The list of organizations and institutions is far from complete, and will grow still less so as we move towards presents times. But it is time to turn our attention to actual art and artists. Abanindranath Thakur (1871-1951) provides a natural starting-point.

The art of Abanindranath, the evolving course of his experiments and achievements, is indicative of the changing spirit of his age. During his apprenticeship in the late nineteenth century, he learnt western techniques from two European teachers, Charles L. Palmer and Olinto Ghilardi. But he soon stopped these lessons, finding the European methods inadequate and restrictive. He began his own search for tradition in courtly Mughal and Rajput painting, assimilating many of their techniques and forms in several series of paintings. They brought him fame, and there is a perceptible originality even in these early works. But a derivative quality remains: more than anybody else, Abanindranath himself realized the inadequacy of such models.

He had meanwhile come into contact with the Japanese savant Kakuzo Okakura, who sent out two painters, Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunro, to India. The idea was that Indian and Japanese artists should work together and absorb each other's art. In the economy and understatement of Japanese art, brought out by wash techniques, Abanindranath found a model towards which he had been groping. His response was spontaneous.

Meanwhile in 1905 Abanindranath became Vice-Principal of the Government Art School. Among his students there were Nandalal Basu

(1883-1966), Kshitindranath Majumdar (1891-1975), Asitkumar Haldar (1890-1964), Surendranath Ganguli (1885-1909), Shailendranath Dey (?-1972), K. Venkatappa (1887-1965) and Samarendranath Gupta (1886-1963). All of them came under Abanindranath's spell, and spread its magic across India by becoming famous practitioners as well as principals of the few art schools in the country before Independence. Debiprasad Raychoudhuri (1898?-1975) went to Madras; Asit Haldar, after a brief stint at Kala Bhaban in Shantiniketan, to Lucknow; Samarendranath Gupta to Lahore; Shailendranath Dey to Jaipur; Pramodkumar Chatterji (1885-1979) to Masulipattam; Kshitindranath Majumdar to Allahabad. The brothers Sarada (1890?-1940) and Ranada (1888-1970) Ukil founded their own school in Delhi. Many others became teachers at various schools all over India. Mukul Dey (1895-1989) became Principal of the Government Art School in Calcutta; and Nandalal Basu, the most famous and favoured of all, took charge of Shantiniketan's Kala Bhaban.

It is therefore unfortunate, if ethnically correct, that the line of art inaugurated by Abanindranath should be termed the 'Bengal' or



Facing page :

Above :

39.1 Ranadaprasad Gupta

Below :

39.2 E. B. Havell

From the top :

39.3 Captive Sita.
Abanindranath Thakur

39.4 The Birth of Krishna.
Abanindranath Thakur, Krishnalila Series : Tempera





Above
39.5 Abanindranath and his disciples including Nandalal Basu, Asit Haldar, Shailen Dey and Kshitin Majumdar

39.6 Jaminiprakash Ganguli

'Neo-Oriental' School. Its influence spread across the country; and while it incorporated various strains of oriental influence, this was in response to a more universal and contemporary spirit. Perhaps the name stuck because of the tenacious adherence of the lesser practitioners to a given and recognizable form for their ideological identity. Not all the disciples forged ahead with their guru.

Abanindranath's own development up to 1915, when he left the Government Art School, was eclectic; but it produced a style that was distinctively his own. He had sent Nandalal and a few other students to assist Lady Herringham in copying the Ajanta cave paintings. But although these introduced a new element in the Indian artistic tradition, largely ignored till then, it did not have much impact on Abanindranath's own art at that stage. His interest in folk art went deeper, and he wrote a book on the folklore of Bengal. Indeed, we may say that he singlehandedly exhausted the possibilities of his eclectic art through his more formative years.

Hence his restless mind was not fully satisfied with the school of painting he himself created. He realized the limitations of the form, to the exclusion of the idiom of a changing world. His immediate reaction was to fall back on traditional Bengali folk art like the *pats*. He experimented with this form in a series of illustrations to medieval Bengali literature, but did not explore its further possibilities. Perhaps he was prevented by age and failing eyesight: soon after, he stopped painting altogether. Yet he remained full of creative energy, exploring the beauty of pure form. The body of work

which he playfully called *Katum Kutum* is devoted to forms with their own elemental beauty.

Rejecting conventional notions of beauty, Abanindranath created a whole new world ranging from the primitive to the abstract. His unbounded creative energy always sought new directions. In his work he traversed nearly a thousand years of art experience, and died in 1951 a contemporary of the times

Any account of Abanindranath will be incomplete without a discussion of his illustrious elder brother Gaganendranath Thakur (1867-1938). The two brothers journeyed together most of the way, Gaganendranath being more responsive to his immediate surroundings. Hence he too charted his own course down which his creative energy flowed. Among his most distinctive contributions is a whole series of cartoons highly critical of the social and political iniquities of the time.

Some critics have discerned faint echoes of cubism in some of Gaganendranath's paintings. In fact there is nothing of the sort, only a painter's structural device to organize a multi-perspective phenomenon into a two-dimensional frame. Gaganendranath's economy and suggestiveness, his skill in wash, and general technical mastery are sometimes superior to his brother's. Innumerable minisketches testify to his expertise in this medium as well.

Abanindranath and most of his students nearly always used water colour as their medium, and tried to follow the six primary principles of Indian art, defined by Abanindranath as follows: *rupabheda* or 'knowledge of appearances'; *pramanani* or 'correct perception, measure and structure of forms'; *bhava* or 'the action of feelings on forms'; *lavanyayojanam* or 'infusion of grace'; *sadrishyam*, 'similitudes'; and *varnikabhanga*, the 'artistic manner of using the brush and colours'. Hence the misconception that this was a revivalist school. Admittedly it owed a great deal to the forms and techniques of traditional painting; but there were significant innovations under Japanese and Chinese as well as multiple Western influences. These comminglings gave the school a distinctive genius of its own – at its worst, eclectic rather than single-notedly derivative or revivalist. If anything was revived, it was the urge to find a new idiom for the art of a resurgent India.

Abanindranath's greatest disciple, Nandalal Basu, lived and worked in Shantiniketan; but



his work was very much an extension of the Calcutta art scene. Nandalal enriched the legacy of his guru with new experiments and absorptions. He went through many phases and achieved command over many techniques and mediums. He hardly ever stuck to a single line even when he had fully mastered it. Landscapes, murals, folk-inspired art of the *pat* type, woodcuts and other graphic work – there was not a single technique or medium, other than oil painting, on which he did not leave his mark. In murals in particular, he profited by his experience in copying the Ajanta paintings in 1909 and the Bagh cave paintings in 1921, as well as from association with Narasingh Lal, the fresco painter from Jaipur.

At the same time, Nandalal was versed in the art history and traditions of many civilizations, and the grammar and techniques of their art. Yet he absorbed their elements so successfully that they appear to be an extension of his expressive self: His Nationalism made the synthesis totally Indian, perfecting the art of concealing a varied art. As teacher, however, he gave his students practically total freedom. He had the catholicity of taste to recognize the genius of his pupil Ramkinkar Baij, so alien to his own, and also to admire the paintings of Rabindranath Thakur, belonging to a totally different world.

As this is the story of art in Calcutta, Rabindranath's paintings must receive less than their artistic due. He took to painting around 1928, in his late sixties – an amateur venturing on new ground, rapt by his own dichotomous self as poet and painter. Nearly 2,000 works testify to his fascination with sheer form unencumbered by set meanings: 'the region of intuition, the unconscious, the superfluous'. A selection of his works was exhibited in India and abroad in the early 1930s. They received wide acclaim in Europe, where the legacy of the preceding century had prepared the artists and the public for such work. But they had virtually no impact on the art scene in Shantiniketan, and only very intermittently in Calcutta.

Even while the search for an Indian identity in art was in full force under Abanindranath's leadership, the study of European art continued in Calcutta. The new socio-political conditions gave Indian artistic traditions greater recognition and support; the periodicals *Prabasi* and *Modern Review*, and the Indian Society of Oriental Art, provided effective publicity. In-



deed, talented European-style artists like the painter Shashi Hesh (1869-?) and the sculptor Phanindranath Basu (1888-1926) left the Bengal art scene despite a certain measure of success, feeling driven into the shadows by the oriental school. Yet quite a few talented practitioners tenaciously pursued European academic art. We have seen how Ranadaprasad Gupta started his own school. At the Government Art School itself, Jaminiprakash Ganguli (1876-1953), por-

From the top
39.7 'The princess of
the dream world'.
Gaganendranath
Thakur

39.8 Female study.
Rabindranath Thakur :
Ink on paper





From the top :
39.9 Painting by
Jamini Ray: Tempera

39.10 Sketch by Atul
Basu



traitist and landscape-painter, disseminated European academic techniques. Appointed Vice-Principal after Abanindranath, he taught many students including the young Jamini Ray.

Jamini Ray (1887-1972) was in the forefront of the Indian Academy of Art, set up in 1919 by Hemendranath Majumdar (1894-1943), a student of Ranadaprasad Gupta. They published a journal briefly from 1920. Atul Basu (1898-1977), Satish Sinha (1894?-1965) and Jogesh Sheel (1895-1926) also began to attract attention at this time.

But these young moderns had little opportunity to exhibit their work. This need was satisfied by the Society of Fine Arts, set up with the industrialist Rajendranath Mukherji as President and Bhabanicharan Laha (1880-1946), himself an accomplished painter, as Secretary. The Society held its first exhibition in 1921: here Jamini Ray, Hemen Majumdar, Atul Basu and Debiprasad Raychoudhuri first received their due recognition. Interestingly, this was the year that Abanindranath was appointed Bageshwari Professor of Fine Arts at Calcutta University.

Academic art training in Calcutta took another turn with Mukul Dey's controversial appointment as Principal of the Government Art School in 1928. Although a disciple of Abanindranath, Dey was something of an iconoclast – a graphic artist, not a painter. He introduced a new finesse in etching and the other graphic arts, bringing about a notable advance in the use of these mediums in India.

By the 1930s, there was a perceptible change in the intellectual climate of Calcutta. A new social consciousness and modernity of form found its most prominent expression in the literature of the post-Tagore generation. This was largely in response to new influences from the West – at a time, interestingly, when the nation was embroiled in the struggle against colonialism. But at this moment of time, the city's art did not significantly reflect either the cultural innovations or the political upheaval – nor, amazingly, the city itself and the life of its people. The art establishment was divided between second-ranking orientalist and competent but uninspired artists in the Western academic line: in other words, between two different bands of traditionalists. The latter group seemed largely unmoved by the transformations of Western art since the 1860s. This is particularly strange when we consider that an exhibition from the Bauhaus visited Calcutta in the 1920s.

Only one man solved for himself the crucial problem of all conscious artists of the time: how to assimilate the legacies of modern western art and yet retain an Indian identity; in other words, how to become a 'modern Indian' artist. The man was Jamini Ray, and his means to a resolution was the folk art of Bengal.

Both Abanindranath and Nandalal had stressed the study of folk art, but in their own work they had merely touched upon the field. Jamini Ray – who began as a painter in the western academic mode – took their precept more seriously. Through an absorption of Bengali *pat* painting, he achieved a simplicity, economy and easy communicability of form to modern tastes, even while highlighting the 'Indian' dimension. Ray came from a Bankura village with a living tradition of *pat* paintings and modelling of dolls, toys and icons. These memories remained a controlling force: though he spent most of his creative life in Calcutta, he refused to submerge himself in the spirit of urban life. Indeed, the stream of work that he

turned out in line with popular tradition, priced and marketed too with popular dissemination in view, marks a new chapter in the socio-economic history of art in Calcutta.

It would be facile to interpret Ray's art only in terms of western academic training and Bengal folk art. Through the late 1930s and early 1940s, he experimented with various modes of modern western art, though always integrating the results within the formal bounds of *pat* painting. These experiments can be traced in a clear succession in any retrospective exhibition of Ray's works. He was no less indebted to Byzantine mosaics and the religious stained glass of Europe.

Most of Ray's work stands on the strength of its design. There is very little variation of tone or texture, especially in his later work. Some of it is so simplified, and so coloured in the tradition of Kalighat *pats*, that it might fail to impress the casual viewer: it is difficult to apprehend truth or beauty in its simplest forms. But his corpus is so unmistakably his own, so profoundly modern yet so disarmingly communicative, as to give him a unique position among twentieth-century artists.

The 1940s saw the climax of the National struggle, and a great famine, along with the Second World War. Neither the War nor the struggle for Independence left any direct mark on the art scene in Calcutta. However, the war did bring some connoisseurs to Calcutta among the soldiers, and quite a few Calcutta artists found a new clientele – Jamini Ray above all.

The visual impact of the famine stirred the city's artists as neither war nor politics could do. Zainul Abedin (1917-76) and Adinath Mukherji (1921-59) painted famine scenes in various mediums. In fact, Abedin first attracted critical attention through his famine paintings. After Independence, he settled in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and was lost to the Calcutta art scene.

The War was not totally ignored by Calcutta artists. Ideologues of certain specific lines, who supported the war effort against the main thrust of the national struggle, formed the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association. The Association had some impact in other fields but little on art: as the political orientation became more and more apparent, many well-known artists grew disenchanted and left the organization.

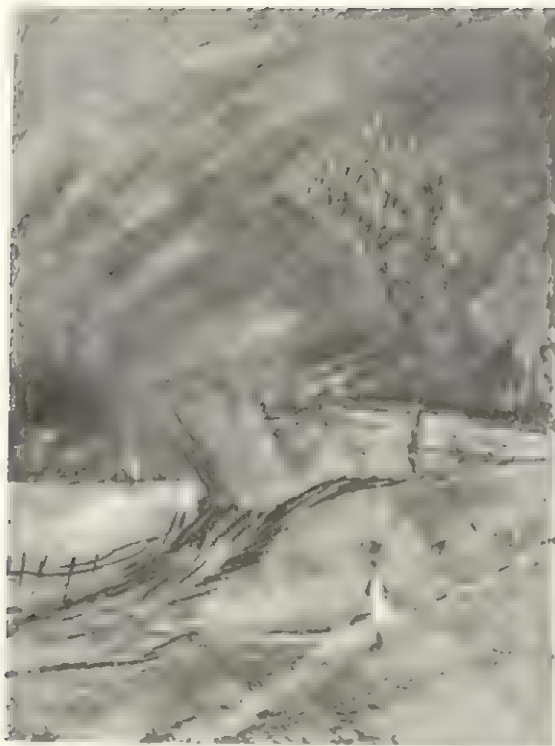
The most important event of this period was

the establishment of the 'Calcutta Group' in 1943. For the first time in Calcutta, working artists who had imbibed the movements of modern European art united under a single name and aesthetic programme. The unity lay not in details of execution – they varied markedly in this respect – but in a common innovative outlook, a desire to shake off ossified traditions and join the mainstream of world art. During the Group's formative period, perhaps even its organizers could not have anticipated its future success.

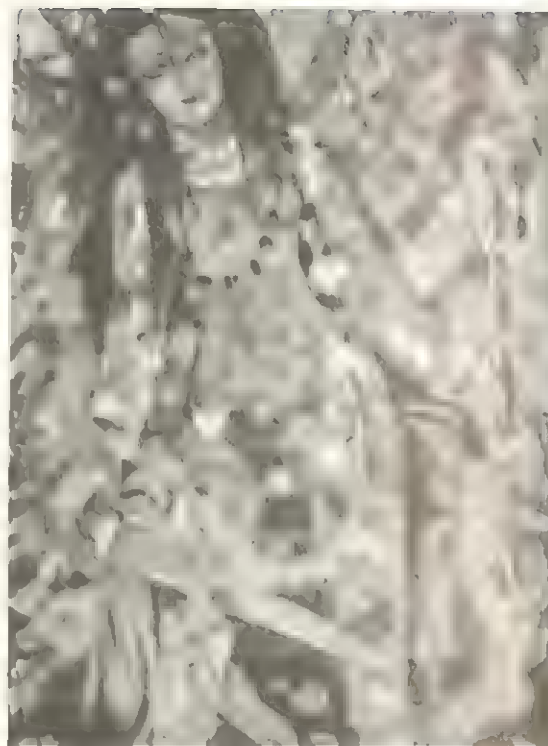
The founder members of the Group, six painters and two sculptors, were all to become celebrities: Gopal Ghosh (1913-80), Paritosh Sen (1918-), Nirad Majumdar (1916-82) Shubho Thakur (1912-85), Rathin Maitra (1913-), Prankrishna Pal (1915-) and Pradosh (1913-) and Kamala Dasgupta. Later Abani Sen (1904-72), Rathin Mitra (1926-), Gobardhan Ash (1907-), Sunilmadhab Sen (1910-79) Hemanta Mishra (1917-) and Ramkinkar Baij (1906-80) joined the Group. The Group lasted from 1943 to 1953. They held their first exhibition in 1945 at Artistry House, and later ones at no 1 Chourangi Terrace. This latter private house played a noble role by sustainedly

39.11 Charcoal sketch.
Paritosh Sen





Left :
39.12 'Landscape',
Gopal Ghosh : Pastel



Right :
39.13 'Sthira Bhava'
Nirad Majumdar : Oil

offering its ground floor to young artists to hold their exhibitions. Artistry House, at no 15 Park Street, was the grander venue in those days.

Most significant in the all-India context was the Group's 1950 exhibition conjointly with the Bombay Progressive Group, which include such painters as M.F. Husain, K.H. Ara, S.H. Raza and H.A. Gade. And the enduring impact of the Calcutta Group is shown by the fact that since their time, virtually every exhibition in Calcutta, barring formal retrospectives, has consisted of truly modern painting by present-day judgment.

From the 1940s to 1960, rising painters and sculptors formed various circles and occasionally organized group shows. Among them were Chitrangshu, the Artists' Circle and the West Bengal Artists' Union. Chitrangshu in particular lost a powerful painter by the premature death of Nikhil Bishwas (1930-66). Eventually, serious artists from these groups came together in the Society of Contemporary Artists (SCA), which held its first exhibition in November 1960. Here were displayed the paintings of Somnath Hore (1921-), Arun Basu (1934-), Shyamal Datta Ray (1934-), Suhas Ray (1936-), Sanat Kar (1935-), Prakash Karmakar (1933-), Sukanta Basu (1929-) and Sunil Das, and the sculptures of Sharbari

Raychoudhuri (1933-) and Raghunath Sinha.

Needless to say, every serious artist of the day did not join the SCA, and many who did moved away later on. The point to note was that even in 1960, talented young artists had to form a group in order to find recognition. It is the SCA's remarkable achievement that most of its members, past and present, have won fame throughout India and, in many cases, abroad: its later entrants include Ganesh Pyne (1937-), Bikash Bhattacharya (1940-), Ganesh Haloi (1936-), Amitabha Banerji (1929-), Dharmanarayan Dasgupta (1939-) and Ajit Chakrabarti (1930-). Over thirty years, the SCA has maintained its rank as a creative group of the highest order. This is specially laudable given the frequently faction-ridden state of Calcutta society.

There are many other active groups of artists in Calcutta, comprising many well-known names and holding exhibitions regularly. Those registered with the Lalit Kala Academy alone add up to a staggering number. But it is time to shift focus to two other major modes: sculpture and the graphic arts.

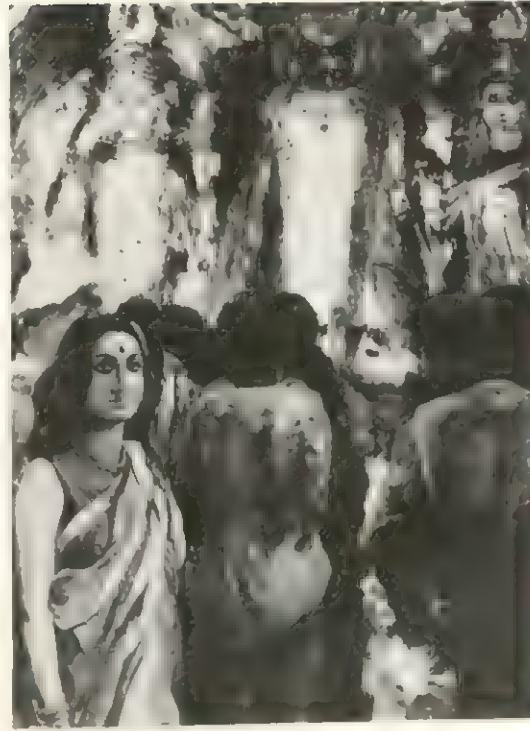
Sculpture is particularly confined by financial and logistical limitations. The public statues of the Raj were executed by British sculptors. Indian sculptors were only commissioned privately for portrait sculpture of famous or

wealthy Indians, where the artist was largely bound by the client's demands. Most family commissions went to clay modellers from Krishnanagar and Kumartuli. Trained sculptors reproduced these clay models in marble or, very rarely, in bronze. Even today, Calcutta sculptors work more at modelling than sculpting.

Among the early notable sculptors to originate from Calcutta, Hiranmay Raychoudhuri (1884-1962) went on to the Royal Academy and, on his return to India, earned his reputation chiefly outside Bengal. Debiprasad Raychoudhuri too spent most of his working life in Madras, becoming Principal of the Government Art School there; but some of his finest work, like the full-size statues of Ashutosh Mukherji, Hariram Goenka and Mahatma Gandhi are located in Calcutta. In his portraiture, he tried to introduce the salient features of the subject's personality, though – especially in his early days – he was confined by the common demand of the time for an exact likeness. Some of his late work afforded him scope to show his compositional skill, as in the statue of Gandhi and work related to the freedom struggle of 1942. It is in Debiprasad's work that Indian sculpture first shows well-defined modern trends, though his work as a whole, in both painting and sculpture, stands somewhere between tradition and modernity.

Ramkinkar Baij worked practically all his life at Shantiniketan; indeed, there was scarcely any of his work in Calcutta until a copy of one was installed at Bidyut Bhaban in Bidhan Nagar. But he enters into a discussion of sculpture in Calcutta because he was generally recognized there as a pioneering influence. Although whatever sculpture lessons he received were in the European academic style, his creations were entirely born of his own genius. He mostly worked outdoors and chose the common people around him as subjects: whether representational, stylized or abstract, his work always has an organic integrity and exuberant energy. Most of the time, it is so formalized as to exude a symbolic quality. Among his direct disciples are Shankha Choudhuri (1916–) and Prabhas Sen; and he trained countless others at Shantiniketan's Kala Bhaban.

Pradosh Dasgupta, one of the founders of the Calcutta Group, was Principal of the Government Art School at Calcutta before going to Delhi as Director of the National Museum of



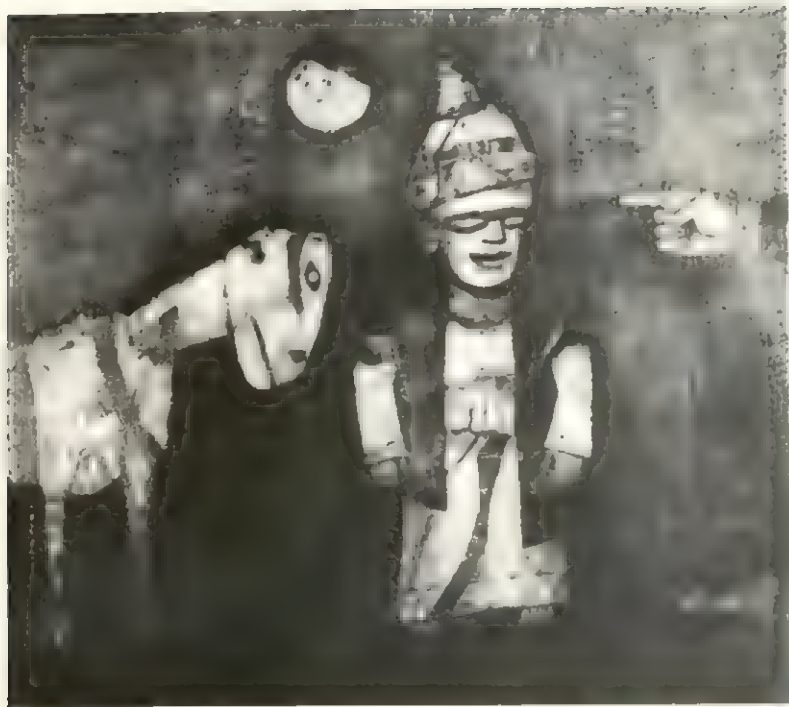
Modern Art. Trained at the Royal Academy and under Debiprasad Raychoudhuri at Madras, his deep understanding of modern European sculpture helped him to find a form of his own. At the Government Art School, he completely reorganized the teaching of sculpture. The results are apparent in the work of his students like Ajit Chakrabarti and Sharbari Raychoudhuri, both now at Kala Bhaban. But although well-known in India and abroad, only a few of Dasgupta's works are on public view. Among them are the portrait statues of Subhashchandra Basu, Praphul-lachandra Ray and Naliniranjan Sarkar.

Chintamani Kar (1915–) achieved renown in both painting and sculpture, but finally turned to the latter as his first love. In his own work, he blends modernity with India's traditional forms with a masterly sense of composition, in both human groups and abstracts. But his greatest role has perhaps been to train and inspire a whole generation of fine young sculptors at the Government School of Art, where he succeeded Pradosh Dasgupta as Principal. After a celebrated career as painter and graphic artist, Somnath Hore too has turned to sculpture and created something entirely his own, treating themes of contemporary suffering through conventionally recognizable yet symbolically functional forms.

Above
39.14 *From the 'Durga' series*. Bikash Bhattacharya : oil

Below
39.15 *'The Santal Family'* : Ramkinkar Baij





Above :
39.16 Painting by
Ganesh Pyne :
Tempera

Below :
39.17 Ashok, The
Emperor of Peace :
sculpted during the
Naxalite Movement.
Meera Mukherji :
Bronze



Most modern sculpture in Calcutta, even more than painting, is derived from western models. Hence Meera Mukherji's (1923-) work takes on a special significance. Her favourite technique is drawn from Dhokra folk art; her subjects from Bengal rural life and sometimes from the old epics and myths. There are even traces of the Buddhist art of the *stupas*. She has achieved a happy synthesis that we may truly call modern Indian sculpture. Several extremely able younger sculptors are seeking a similar synthesis, and I feel the world of art will give them eager recognition before the end of the century.

The graphic arts have a shorter history in modern Calcutta. There was, of course, a long tradition of woodcuts and lithographs. Nandalal Basu did a lot of work in this line, but few of his students followed him. Hence Mukul Dey performed a pioneering role when he returned from England with a training in modern techniques of etching, aquatint and other modes of graphic art. Yet his work belonged in spirit to the traditional Bengal school of painting. It was no mean achievement to bring out the effect of wash, flowing lines and graded tonal variation through the vastly different mediums of etching and aquatint.

Ramendranath Chakrabarti (1902-55), sometime Principal of the Government Art School, continued Dey's work with ability; but Haren Das, (1921-) also a teacher at the School, expressed a rarer sensibility through his woodcuts, linocuts and other techniques. Yet he too is important first and foremost as the teacher of an entire generation of graphic artists.

The graphic art scene in the city took a dramatic new turn as western technical innovations were absorbed by some artists, especially from France, and passed on to their colleagues in Calcutta. Almost the first such artist was Somnath Hore. He was working in Delhi at the time, but his lithographs were exhibited at the Chemould Gallery in Calcutta, and displayed a new skill and sensitivity, which he has since expressed in continually new forms and techniques.

More of a local presence was Arun Basu, sometime member of the Society of Contemporary Artists. He imparted a new interest in graphics to several friends who had made their mark in other mediums. Such was their exuberance with this new medium that print after print, by nearly all the members of the SCA,



appeared from their old dilapidated machine. Their experiments continued even after Arun Basu left for the USA, where he now resides: without his catalytic presence, the isolated interest of a few artists could never have come to fruition as it has, for instance, in the work of Sanat Kar and Shyamal Datta Ray. The SCA retains a great interest in graphics. Members who joined later, like Amitabha Banerji and Laluprasad Shaw, have won all-India acclaim in this medium. And both Calcutta and Kala Bhaban are training a new generation of graphic artists whose experiments are endlessly diverse.

As my account indicates, there has been prolific activity in Calcutta's art world since the Second World War. The number of art groups, circles and societies is incalculable; they die and are reborn almost as prolifically as the 'little magazine' groups of the literary world. But we are yet to discover an idiom which mingles the harvest of modern European art movements with indigenous convention and, further, with the spirit of new India. The most heartening development is the expansion of patronage, clientele and facilities for exhibition. There are at least half-a-dozen one-man or group shows open in the city every single day of the year.

Until the mid-1950s, Artistry House and no 1 Chourangi Terrace were practically the only exhibition rooms available. Of course, the



Academy of Fine Arts held its Annual Exhibition – at the Indian Museum in those days – as did the students of the Government Art School (made a College in 1951). But today the Academy has its own quarters, with a permanent gallery and auditorium as well as half-a-dozen exhibition rooms. The Birla Academy of Art and Culture offers similar facilities.

Among private galleries, the first two, the Chemould and the Arts and Prints Gallery, both on Park Street, eventually closed down, though the former has recently reopened. The Chitrakoot Art Gallery has won distinction by its regular exhibitions of famous, and sometimes rising, artists as well as occasional retrospectives. No less laudable is its success in building up an interested clientele for works of art. This is also being done at two new venues, Gallerie '88 and the Genesis Art Gallery. And for a few years in the 1970s, the city saw an annual Art Fair where even established artists sold their work at moderate prices to encourage a taste for art among the public. Those who still suffer neglect are the sculptors; and except for a handful of shops, there are few places where one can obtain prints, whether of Indian or European artists.

All in all, there is much activity, much production, and much thought. The search for a complete new idiom will no doubt be fulfilled one day.

Left :
39.18 'Devotion',
Amitabha Banerji :
Etching

Right :
39.19 'Puppet King',
Shyamal Datta Ray :
Etching

CLASSICAL MUSIC IN MODERN CALCUTTA

Nilaksha Gupta

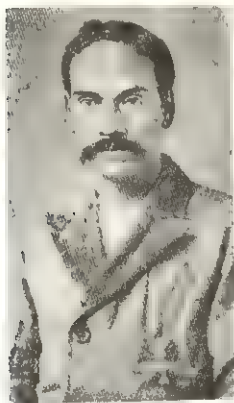
Until the beginning of this century, the rich men of Calcutta chiefly found entertainment in regional forms of music such as the *Half-Akhrai*, *Tarja*, *Kirtan* and Bengali *Tappa*. Patronage of North Indian classical music was confined to a few rajas, zamindars and enlightened connoisseurs. After 1912, patronage of classical music became more widespread among the rich. The *ustads* performing at their *jalsas* and *mehfils* make up a formidable list : Alladia Khan, Mouzuddin, Kale Khan, Radhikaprasad Goswami, Badal Khan, Lakshmi-prasad Mishra, Biswanath Rao (dhamari), Chandan Choubey, Fida Hussein (sarod), Majid Khan (beenkar), Hafiz Khan (beenkar), Imdad Khan, Alauddin Khan, Aftabuddin Khan, Hafiz Ali Khan, Bhaiya Saheb Ganpat Rao, Kaukav Khan, Keramatullah Khan, Abid Hussein and Biru Mishra. Legend-day women singers came too, like Kesarbai Kerkar, Gangubai Hangal and Hirabai Barodekar. In separate *mehfils* and *mujras* performed *tawaifs* or *baijis* with the legendary Gaohar Jan presiding over the entire clan. There were also Malka Jan Agrawali, Malka Jan Chulbullewali, Jaddan Bai, Asmat Bai and Chanda Bai.

But at this stage, the local enthusiasts were patrons, connoisseurs, simple listeners, or at most amateur performers. There were indeed some committed Bengali *dhrupad* singers like Gopalchandra Chakrabarti (1832-1903),

Gopeshwar Banerji (1880-1963) and Radhikaprasad Goswami (1863-1925), but they were usually patronized by zamindars outside Calcutta. People like Birendrakishore Raychoudhuri (1903-75), his nephew Bimalakanta Raychoudhuri (1909-80) and the brothers Bishenchand (1899-) and Raichand Baral (1903-81) never became public performers. Practically none of the pupils of Enayat Khan the sitarist or Amir Khan the sarodia were professionals, with the partial exceptions of Radhikamohan Maitra (1917-81) and Timirbaran (1904-87), though the latter came to make orchestral compositions his main occupation. True professionalism began among the singers with Girijashankar Chakrabarti (1885-1948), Gnanendraprasad Goswami (1902-47), Bhishmadeb Chatterji (1909-77) and Tarapada Chakrabarti (1909-75), and among instrumentalists even later with Nikhil Banerji (1931-86), Balam Pathak, Manilal Nag and Indranil Bhattacharya. Today, of course, most established and rising artistes are full-time professionals.

The nature of their public has also changed drastically. Courtly and feudal patronage is extinct; their place has been taken to some extent by support from new commercial sources — both as assistance for particular soirées or concerts, or in sustained and institutionalized form, the outstanding example of the latter being the Sangeet Research Academy set up in 1978. But the chief patronage of classical

40.1 Bishwanath Rao





music in Calcutta is now the collective one of conferences and music festivals. It is the dominance of these that gives Calcutta's classical-music scene its unique life. Calcutta is above all a city of audiences, courtly and democratic.

The long-continuing tradition of music conferences – the pioneer being the Bengal Music Conference – was augmented in 1947 by Shailen Banerji's Tansen Sangeet Sammelan and in 1953 by Kalidas Sanyal's Sadarang Sangeet Sammelan. These have perhaps now lost something of their magic, yielding to the Dover Lane Music Conference (revived in 1982 after a twelve-year gap) and the Kalasangam, dating from the 1970s and now famous for its single-raga festivals. I must also mention the Suresh Sangeet Sammelan, the now defunct Calcutta Music Circle, and the Park Circus Sangeet Sammelan. Memorable one-time conferences are another regular feature: the gigantic Hafiz Ali Khan Memorial Festivals (1973 and 1977), for instance, or the tenth-anniversary programme of the Sangeet Research Academy in 1988.

Most of the stars of these concerts and festivals have always come from outside Calcutta. There is no 'Calcutta gharana': local singers and musicians have always declared their allegiance to the birthplaces of their *gharanas* elsewhere in India. It is only after the decline of these great *gharanas* that Calcutta has produced a generation of musicians who con-



sider their roots to be in this city. It is very likely that artists born and trained in Calcutta will play an increasingly important role in programmes of the future.

While most major artistes have performed regularly in Calcutta, some developed special relations with the city. This helped to build up a local body of artistes and connoisseurs. One of the most important influences on classical vocal music in early twentieth-century Calcutta was that of Badal Khan (1833-1937?). The exact date of his arrival in the city is debated, but when he was about seventy, he was retained exclusively by Seth Dulichand to teach his wife Tarabai, and took up residence at the Seth's villa in Dumdum. A host of talented musicians associated with him here, such as the harmonium specialist Bhaiya Saheb Ganpat Rao, Bishwanath Rao, Mouzuddin Khan and Shyamal Khetri.

After his patron's death, Badal Khan stayed on in Calcutta. Although he lived in poverty – caused largely by his willingness to teach local students for nominal fees – he commanded enormous respect, and his disciples (followed in time by their own) were the chief pioneers of classical music in Bengal. Most eminent among these disciples was Bhishmadeb Chatterji; other luminaries were Jamiruddin Khan (?-1932), Krishnachandra De (1893-1962), Giriijashankar Chakrabarti (1885-1948), Dhiren Bhattacharya (1891-1964), Bimalaprasad Chatterji,

Left :
40.2 Alauddin Khan

Right :
40.3 Badal Khan

Below :
40.4 Jamiruddin Khan



Amiyanath Sanyal (1895–1978) and Shachin Das (Matilal) (1914–).

Badal Khan was descended from a family of musicians from Kirana; he was a master of all major vocal styles, especially those of Agra and Gwalior. Other famous resident *ustads* belonged to the Benares *gharana*, like Lakshmiprasad Mishra ('Lachmi Ustad'), Shivsevak Mishra and Pashupatisevak Mishra.

Two of Badal Khan's most illustrious admirers were also well-known in Calcutta. Abdul Karim Khan visited the city in the 1920s and 1930s, while Faiyaz Khan formed closer links. The Lansdowne Road residence of Chittaranjan (Chitu) Ganguli was his customary halting-place. He exercised a mesmeric influence over Calcutta audiences, and both Bhishmadeb Chatterji and Gnanendraprasad Goswami came under his influence. It was through this exposure to a variety of stylistic influences that native Bengali singers began to enter the top league of stylists: Bhishmadeb, Gnan Goswami, Tarapada Chakrabarti, Girijashankar Chakrabarti and Chinmay Lahiri (1916–84).

The Patiala *gharana* too has a long association with Calcutta, with the great Kale Khan himself a resident for some years. Ashiq Ali Khan also performed here. But it was of course Bade Ghulam Ali Khan who later hypnotized audiences in Calcutta. Among his disciples in the city are Meera and Prasun Banerji.

Another, more recent influence was Amir Khan. Though he did not leave behind any pupil of his own stature, he influenced artistes who had never taken any training from him. Bade Ghulam and Amir Khan resided for long periods in the city and were leading figures in the music conferences. Bade Ghulam's son Munawar Ali Khan (1930–) continued to live in the city for a long time. Aminuddin Dagar (1923–), the younger of the original Dagar Brothers, is a permanent resident and has established a school here.

In the field of instrumental music, Calcutta's prospects are perhaps brightest as regards the sarod. In a six-day sarod festival at New Delhi in December 1988, half the participants were from Calcutta. And it is only natural that this should be so, for Calcutta's sarod traditions go back to the brothers Keramatullah and Kaukav Khan, who moved to the city between 1907 and 1915 and stimulated a local interest augmented by Muhammad Amir Khan between 1916 and 1934. Among the latter's pupils were Radhika-



mohan Maitra, Timirbaran Bhattacharya and Banikantha Mukherji. Radhikamohan also learnt *alap* and *dhrupad* from Muhammad Dabir Khan, the last musician of the Beenkar *gharana* originating from Tansen's daughter Saraswati. Through Radhikamohan and his disciples such as Buddhadeb Dasgupta (1933–) and Samarendranath Sikdar, and their pupils in turn, the Amir Khan school of sarod-playing promises to continue unbroken into the future in Calcutta. The only noted exponent of the earlier line of Kaukav and Keramatullah Khan is Shyam Ganguli (1911–). The Maihar school of Alauddin Khan and Ali Akbar Khan is also active in the city, and Ali Akbar's cousin Bahadur Khan is a resident musician here. Alauddin Khan received his early training in Calcutta: his final guru, beenkar Wazir Khan of Rampur, lived in Chandni Chowk in the 1890s. Alauddin made his first public breakthrough at a soirée of the Bhabanipur Sangeet Samaj, and visited the city regularly ever since. Another important presence was that of Hafiz Ali Khan (1888–1972) who spent half of each year from 1915 to 1935 in Calcutta. He taught Raichand Baral's elder brother Bishenchand at their family residence. Though he would not accept many pupils, his regular recitals, both at *baithaks* and at the Lalchand Smriti Utsab that the Baral brothers started in their father's memory in 1928, perfected the sarod appreciation of the Calcutta audience. He was considered the doyen of *sarodias*, especially by virtue of his high-speed *jhala*. In 1930, a tabla player,

40.5 Tarapada Chakrabarti

40.6 Gnanendraprasad Goswami

Right :
40.7 Faiyaz Khan with Paresh Bhattacharya on the tabla



Darshan Singh of Benares, challenged Hafiz Ali to a musical duel at the Baral's house – and died after half an hour of high-speed *sangat*. Hafiz Ali's youngest son Amjad Ali Khan (1945–), whose name is so closely linked to sarod-playing in Calcutta today, also laid great stress on an elaborate high-speed *jhala* in his salad days.

On the whole, the future of sarod-playing in the city seems brighter than that of sitar-playing. This is a little sad, because Calcutta has been the home of practically the entire course of the Imdadkhani *gharana*. Ustad Imdad Khan (1848–1920) arrived here in the closing years of the nineteenth century, staying at the house of Taraprasad Ghosh on Beadon Street. He brought out several records in 1915 and 1916, soon before leaving for Indore, where he died in 1920. His son Enayat Khan was appointed court musician by Brajendrakishore Raychoudhuri (1874–1957), the zamindar of Gouripur with its illustrious history of musical patronage. However, Enayat spent part of his time at his illustrious patron's Calcutta residence, and was the acknowledged monarch of the sitar in this part of India till his death. He trained a host of pupils – among them Amiyakanti Bhattacharya (1916–1969), Jitendramohan Sengupta (?–1972), Bimalakanta Raychoudhuri, Gnanadakanta (1897–1939) and Niradakanta (?–1940) Lahiri Choudhuri, John Gomes and D.T. Joshi – and, like his father, brought out several gramophone records.

Enayat's eldest son Vilayat Khan (1927–) left his family home at Park Circus early in his career, but the second son Imrat Khan lived there for a long time and trained his four sons in the city. The two elder sons, Nishat and Irshad Khan, have established themselves in their own right, as has Vilayat's son Shujat.

The death of Nikhil Banerji in 1986 was an inestimable loss to Calcutta music. Though Ali Akbar Khan and Ravi Shankar have their roots in Bengal, and Vilayat Khan grew up here, it was Nikhil Banerji who could be described as an authentic Calcutta personality, in spite of his fairly limited public appearances. He was trained by Alauddin Khan in Maihar, and later received guidance from Ali Akbar and Annapurna Devi. Austere and uncompromising in his performances, his recitals were a connoisseur's joy.

At a more fundamental level, popular interest in sitar music has been kept up in the city for



From the top :
40.8 Bhishmadeb
Chatterji at a chamber
concert

40.9 Enayat Khan

40.10 Radhikamohan
Maitra



From the top :
40.11 Keramatullah
Khan

40.12 Gnanprakash
Ghosh

40.13 Nikhil Banerji

the last twenty years by such committed players as Manilal Nag, Balaram Pathak and Indranceel Bhattacharya. They have also trained a lot of junior artistes. Meanwhile, away from the din and bustle of music conferences, Bimal Mukherji, the sitarist's sitarist with his repertoire of old *gats*, rare techniques and highly intellectualized approach, spends much of his time giving lecture-demonstrations in Varanasi or Lucknow. Even more seldom heard, during his peaceful retirement in Calcutta, was the old maestro Mushtaq Ali Khan (1911-89).

An area where Calcutta artistes have truly left their mark is tabla playing, both amateur and professional. A full account would need an article to itself. Amateurs like Hiru Ganguli and Raichand Baral earned an all-India reputation, and there has always been a large local body of tabla exponents; but it must be admitted that the star performers in the city's music programmes were usually accompanied by tabla players from outside. Among the few local players at this level were Gnanprakash Ghosh (1910-) – who left off the tabla rather early – his pupil Shyamal Basu, a specialist in accompanying vocal music, and Kanailal Datta (1925-77).

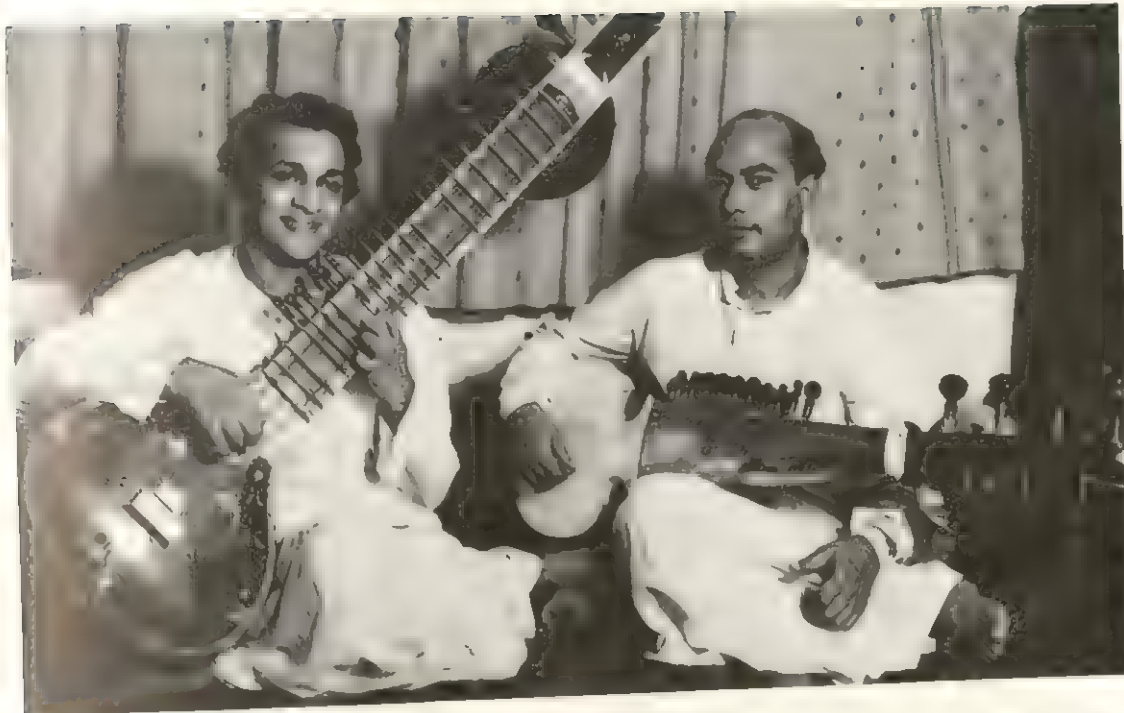
The real tabla star of Calcutta, however, was Keramatullah Khan (1917-77) who arrived here in his childhood with his father Masitullah Khan (?-1974) and received his training in the

city. (Masitullah Khan was the guru of both Raichand Baral and Gnanprakash Ghosh.) In his long career, Keramatullah accompanied virtually every major artiste to have performed in the city, but he was usually reserved for the vocalists. It was only in the 1970s that Calcutta tabla players broke into the top level of accompaniment for instrumental music. The path was cleared in the previous decade by Shankar Ghosh (1935-), a pupil of Gnanprakash Ghosh. After him came Swapan Choudhuri, Kumar Basu and Anindya Chatterji. Keramatullah Khan's son Sabir Khan (1959-) made his mark at the same time; but although a genuine Calcutta product, he has not been playing regularly in the city for some years now.

In the triumphs of the city's singers, sarod players and tabla players, we can see how the wheel has turned: the city that began as the seat of patrons and connoisseurs has begun to turn out truly professional practitioners of a high order. This is in fact a heartening compensation for the decline that, sadly, so many enthusiasts have sensed in the field of concerts and conferences over the last two decades. After the departure of the classic maestros like Faiyaz Khan, Omkarnath Thakur and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, it was Amir Khan and Bhimsen Joshi who drew audiences by their singing. Among the instrumentalists, first Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan, then Vilayat Khan put themselves beyond the reach of most audiences and organizers; their role was continued by Nikhil Banerji and Amjad Ali Khan. But Amir Khan died in a street accident in Calcutta in 1978; Nikhil Banerji followed him in 1986. The number of established 'greats' within regular reach of Calcutta audiences has shrunk disturbingly; yet the conferences are still forced to rely on the dwindling number of veterans to draw and hold audiences.

This decline in a particular musical tradition and ethos is not peculiar to Calcutta. It is an all-India phenomenon, brought about by the deaths of a great many brilliant musicians over the last fifteen years. Others have virtually retired from the scene, and the performances of yet others evoke memories rather than genuine listening pleasure. Individual recitals in the past have been immortalized in legend: it is difficult to envisage this happening again. The days when listeners sat on the road outside Mahajati Sadan seem gone for ever. There is





From the top
40.14 Ravi Shankar
(left) and Ali Akbar
Khan

40.15 Amir Khan

40.16 Bade Ghulam
Ali Khan

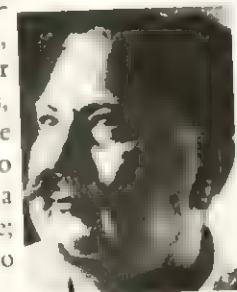
scope for cautious optimism concerning the future, but it is too early to tell.

Another major problem for organizers of music conferences is the lack of funds. Though corporate sponsorship and advertisement revenue provide new sources of income, the fees demanded by the leading musicians – especially instrumentalists, and those with a following abroad – make their appearances increasingly rare. The consequent rise in entry prices has inevitably polarized the audience: concerts that feature the great masters are priced beyond popular reach, while those that do not fail to attract the connoisseur.

Needless to say, interest in classical music has also suffered from the rise of populist and unexacting forms of entertainment, particularly television and video cassettes. The All India Radio, once a serious and effective means of

disseminating musical consciousness, has lost out in the competition. Instead, the young film-oriented audience has been diverted from authentic classical music by the pop-ghazal craze.

Nonetheless, the proliferation of smaller, more evenly-spaced-out musical events is an encouraging new sign, and indeed a unique new feature of the city's musical scene. These small and informal occasions provide a platform for Calcutta's talented younger musicians, and a source of pleasure and interest for enthusiasts through the year. The conferences, however critically we view them, still provide unmatched fare for the connoisseur. There is no room for complacency, indeed rather for a searching examination of the city's music scene; but Calcutta can still lay convincing claim to being the 'music capital of India'.





MUSIC IN MODERN CALCUTTA: BENGALI SONGS



Rajyeswar Mitra



41.1 *Pyara Saheb*

Facing page :

Left :

41.2 *Indubala Debi*

Right :

41.3 *Gaohar Jan at a recording session, c 1902*

Below :

41.4 *Shachin Deb Barman*

41.5 *Himangshu-kumar Datta*

41.6 *Lalchand Baral*

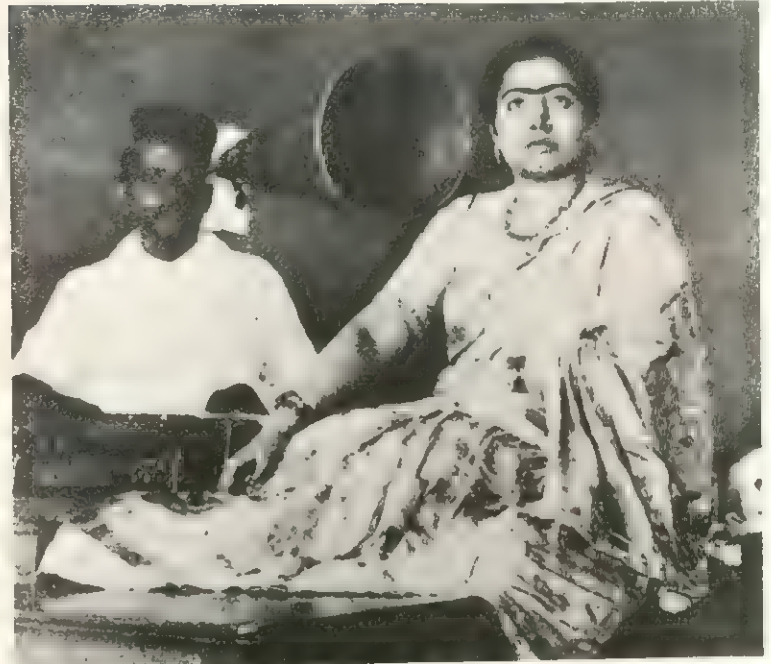
I closed my account of old Calcutta's music in Volume I with the early days of the Nationalist Movement and the coming of the gramophone record. I also remarked there that this period constitutes a watershed, both technically and culturally, in the history of Calcutta's music. But the change took some time to gain full sway. Despite the disturbances generated by the Partition of Bengal, and the subsequent development of the National Movement, the first two decades of the twentieth century were on the whole a peaceful and stable period culturally. Most of the major varieties of music current at the beginning of the century continued to flourish: the *tappa*; devotional songs like *Kirtans*, *Ramprasad*, *Shyamasangeet* or songs in worship of Kali, and *Agamani* or songs at the advent of Durga Puja; that very different type of religious song, the austere and monotheistic *Brahmasangeet*; and, at the other extreme, the delightful songs from *jatras* that preserved the grace while eschewing the obscenity of the songs associated with the earlier Babu culture. A few traditional genres like the *Kabi* song, *Akhrai* and *Panchali* dwindled away owing to changed tastes and consequent lack of patronage. But even today, one can hear many types of old songs as collected and lovingly rendered by the veteran singer Ramkumar Chatterji.

The Bengali lyric song had by this time acquired a momentum of its own. A large and

varied repertoire of songs had been built up to cater to every possible taste of the city's population. One large repository of such songs was the theatre. The compositions of Girish-chandra Ghosh, the leading theatre personality of the day, held their own beside those of Rabindranath Thakur, Dwijendralal Ray, Rajanikanta Sen and Atulprasad Sen, though the last two did not live in Calcutta.

The progress of the Bengali song was quickened, indeed galvanized by the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and the Swadeshi Movement a little later. There was to be another spurt of patriotic songs from the third decade of the century until Independence in 1947. But for some time after the Swadeshi Movement, there was no particular innovation in the Bengali musical scene.

The truly notable development was technological and institutional: the coming of the record age. The first Bengali records were cut in Hanover, Germany from recordings made in India. In Calcutta, H. Bose's Talking Machine Company was followed by the founding of the Gramophone Company's works in 1907. The reproduction was far from satisfactory on these early discs, and the limited time also made for constraint. All the same, the historic role of the Gramophone Company cannot be overemphasized. They sedulously studied all extant varieties of Indian music and sought out the best singers to render them, even approaching



singing-women and dancers in the red-light areas. Indeed, the Company undertook a planned programme of recording all types of music: its monthly list of new releases became an institution. Needless to say, artistes of all schools and traditions offered their songs to the Company in the interest of their own publicity: for the first time, singers could become popular stars just like actors. Perhaps the final seal on the company's reputation was set in the late 1920s, when 'respectable' women agreed to have their voices recorded. Among the earliest was the Rabindrasangeet exponent Kanak Das.

The earliest popular 'record artistes' included a widespread company: Gaohar Jan, Pyara Saheb, Malka Jan Agrawali, 'Miss Das' (Amala Das), Mouzuddin, the leading exponent of *Khayal*, and Lalchand Baral, who introduced such innovations as Bengali classical-based or *Ragpradhan* songs. It is remarkable how quickly even *Khayal* singers adapted themselves to the constraints of a three-and-a-half minute performance. It is through gramophone records that Lalchand Baral (1870-1907) has gone down in the annals of music, as was later largely the case with Munshi Muhammad Kasem (1888-1959), who sang Hindu devotional songs under the name 'K. Mallik'; so too with Krishnachandra Dey (1893-1962), Pankajkumar Mallik (1905-78) and Shachin Deb Burman (1908-75). Among the early women singers, Indubala (1898-1984) and Angurbala (1901-84) won dis-

tinction. Himangshukumar Datta (1908-44) – the *Surasagar* or 'Ocean of Music' – was the most outstanding composer of tunes, and Hemendrakumar Ray (1888-1963) supplemented his fame as a popular fiction-writer by his success as a lyricist.

It has sometimes been questioned whether the Gramophone Company elevated musical tastes to a truly desirable extent. But it cannot be denied that, apart from providing sheer listening pleasure, gramophone records brought about a general awareness of music which till then had been lacking in the *bhadralok* class outside small circles of enthusiasts. And the higher reaches of music were not left unexplored. Gnanendraprasad Goswami (1902-47) and Bhishmadeb Chatterji (1909-77) brought out many Bengali songs in classical modes. (Bhishmadeb's earliest record, of two of Nidhu Babu's tappas, appeared when he was a schoolboy of thirteen.) And a highly intellectual singer, Dilipkumar Ray (1897-1980), Dwijendralal's son, rose to eminence in Calcutta in the 1920s, though he lived elsewhere through most of his later life. I may also mention here Dilipkumar's talented but short-lived pupil Uma Basu (1921-42).

The 1920s also witnessed the remarkable rise of Kazi Nazrul Islam (1898-1976). Recorded music provided him with his chief platform, though his songs played a celebrated part in the Nationalist Movement as well. Both poet and



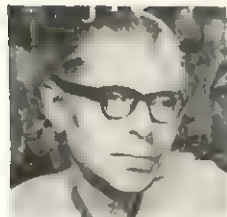


From the top :

41.7 Krishna-
chandra Dey

41.8 Pankajkumar
Mallik

41.9 Jaganmay Mitra



composer in the tradition stemming from Rabindranath, Nazrul's chief musical innovation was to introduce the *ghazal* in Bengali music. His careful and fastidious art successfully implanted the lyrical and musical beauties of the Persian and Urdu *ghazal* into Bengali, and indeed inaugurated an age of *ghazal* singing in Calcutta – a new branch added to the range of Bengali song, though perhaps lacking the maturity and inherent depth of the *tappa*. The first recorded Bengali *ghazal* was Nazrul's *Bagichay bulbuli tui* sung by 'K. Mallik'.

Atulprasad Sen (1871–1934) also introduced many styles and patterns of North Indian music into the Bengali song; but although his work was extremely popular in Calcutta, he lived far away in Lucknow. Rabindranath himself had already left Calcutta for Shantiniketan, though of course he continued to dominate the entire world of Bengali song as well as literature. Dwijendralal and Rajanikanta were dead. Calcutta was thus left without any of those towering personalities who had composed songs as a matter of free artistic choice at the highest level: there were only professionals who, however gifted, had to submit to the dictates of their trade. Their made-to-order music was not very inspiring, though it did provide the people with pleasing musical fare.

It was at this time that the student commun-

ity of Calcutta became major patrons of music. The leading professional singers would attend the periodic functions organized by them. Thus another important stage was crossed in Calcutta's sociology of music: the generality of the younger generation came to understand and appreciate the art. The long-standing taboo on young people's indulgence in such 'frivolities' was lifted at last.

Another, immensely powerful medium for the propagation of music was inaugurated in 1930 with the founding of the Indian State Broadcasting Service with headquarters at Calcutta. It was renamed the All India Radio (AIR) in 1936. The Indian Broadcasting Company had set up its Calcutta station on 26 August 1927 – a month after their first station in Bombay – and this was directly taken over by the State Broadcasting Service.

The All India Radio played a parallel role to the Gramophone Company by providing singers with a platform and a means of secure establishment – and needless to say, the range of programmes offered every day far exceeded those available from records or any other source. For several decades before and after Independence, the AIR provided a vital agency for both support and patronage of musicians and training of musical audiences. The rise of television has now sadly impaired the popularity – and hence the effectiveness – of this function of the AIR. Though television might be thought to provide a new medium of even greater potential, this has not yet been realized so far as the propagation of music is concerned.

In the same decade that ushered in the AIR, the silent film was decisively replaced by the talkies, bringing another dimension to Calcutta's musical scene. Playback artistes were very much the exception in that age, the rule being for actors to sing their own songs (or singers to be themselves cast as actors in singing roles). Thus the early days of the Bengali film saw the rise of such actor-singers as Kanan Debi (1916–) and Pahari Sanyal (1906–74), and also brought out the histrionic power of noted singers like Krishnachandra Dey, Dhirendranath Das (1902–61), K.L. Saigal (1904–47) and Pankajkumar Mallik.

Thus the end of the 1920s saw four powerful media for the dissemination of music: gramophone records, the radio, the stage and the screen, each with its own techniques and requirements. Each demanded a certain simpli-

fication or populism, but compensated by giving music in Calcutta, and in the country generally, a range of support and interest undreamt-of earlier. And one can testify that even qualitatively, the products of the Calcutta media scored some notable successes and reached a generally encouraging level of achievement.

Political movements have long used music for their own ends. Nazrul's patriotic songs marked a new phase of Swadeshi music: some of them were even recorded by the British-owned Gramophone Company. Other political movements, of a leftist or socialist bias, also began to use songs to spread their own messages. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) had a number of outstanding singers and composers among its members: Debabrata Bishwas (1911-80) the Rabindrasangeet singer, Salil Choudhuri the composer and, strongest in their social commitment, Jyotirindra Maitra (1911-77), a founder-member of the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association, and Hemanga Bishwas (1912-87). Hemanta Mukherji was associated with the IPTA towards the end of its heyday. Something of the legacy of the IPTA survives in *Ganasangeet* or 'People's Music', whose best-known exponents are Ajit Pandey and Sabitabrata Datta.

The Second World War, followed by turmoil and suffering before, during and after Independence, relegated music to the sidelines until the 1950s. By that time, the Union Government had formed a full-fledged Ministry of Culture as well as an Academy for music and drama. This has provided for financial assistance to singers and musicians, honours for musical personalities, and international contacts for some leading artistes and experts. But all these benefits focused on the mainstream of North Indian classical music: for Bengali songs, Calcutta has had to depend on the interest and enterprise of its own people.

Perhaps posterity will see the most significant contribution of the post-Independence decades to lie in its academic study and evaluation of the songs of Bengal. The endeavour has crystallized in the creation of a Department of Music at Calcutta University and the establishment of the Rabindra Bharati University, concerned primarily with the fine arts.

In a different way, popular and flourishing lines of song have been set on a firm basis of instruction, cultivation and, to some extent,

analytic study. This is most conspicuously the case with Tagore songs or Rabindrasangeet, to which innumerable centres and institutions are now devoted, the best of them conducted by the leading exponents of the genre.

And what of the actual practice of Bengali songs in recent times? Any selection of names must be invidious. The most popular and successful singer after Pankajkumar Mallik has undoubtedly been Hemanta Mukherji (1920-89); and the connoisseur of classical finesse in songs, and of voices to render it, must also prize the artistry of Sandhya Mukherji, Dhananjay Bhattacharya, Satinath Mukherji, Arati Mukherji and Anup Ghoshal. The older generation will particularly remember the renderings of Jaganmay Mitra. Among Rabindrasangeet singers, few will quarrel if we single out from the many notable interpreters the pre-eminent names of Shantideb Ghosh, Subinay Ray, Suchitra Mitra and Kanika Banerji – the first and last based in Shantiniketan but well-known to Calcutta listeners. But it is important to realize that in these and other fields of music, the leading singers acquire importance and fulfilment only as the first among many, the highest point of an extensive musical culture.

Among lyricists, the legacy of Shailen Roy (1910?-63) and Pranab Ray (1911?-75) was perhaps best upheld, despite inevitable dilution through over-production, by Gouriprasanna Majumdar (1924-86). The selection of composers is an even harder task. Perhaps I should confine myself to the fairly recent, stimulating inventions of Jatileshtar Mukherji.

On the whole, however, it will surely be neither eccentric nor merely nostalgic to see a sad decline in the modern Bengali song or *Adhunik*. Today's singers and composers show much potential talent, but it is seldom brought to intellectual fruition. Instead, it is turned towards populism; the influence of film music is the greatest and most perennial source of contamination. The songs thereby lose their musical integrity; and no less important, they lose their wider cultural value. We no longer feel as we did in the first half of the century – not with patriotic songs alone – that the singers and musicians were capturing something precious and fundamental in the life of the community, and eliciting a common response in return. But enough survives to raise hopes that the Bengali song retains its intrinsic power to excite 'a common wave of thought and joy'.



From the top :

41.10 Hemanta Mukherji

41.11 Sandhya Mukherji

41.12 Debabrata Bishwas

41.13 Salil Choudhuri

CLASSICAL DANCE IN CALCUTTA

Sunil Kothari

The ballet of *Krishna and Radha*, with Uday Shankar as Krishna and Anna Pavlova as Radha, has gone down in the annals of the world's history of dance. Uday Shankar (1900-77) placed Indian dance on the world map.

Yet he took to the art by a happy accident. He was in London, studying at the Royal College of Art. A common friend, Komalata Banerji, who later composed the music for *Krishna and Radha*, introduced him to Anna Pavlova. She was in search of a male dancer for her 'Hindu ballet'. Uday Shankar took the plunge. Though lacking in formal training as a dancer, he choreographed two Indian ballets for Pavlova, *Krishna and Radha* and *A Hindu Wedding*. The first performance was held at Covent Garden in September 1923.

The rest is history. Uday Shankar formed a troupe of 'Hindu dancers' from among his family and friends and presented *Tandava Nritya* on 31 March 1931 at the Theatre des Champs Élysées in Paris, with the French dancer Sunka as Parvati. He was also helped greatly by the Swiss artiste Alice Boner.

In 1939 he set up the Uday Shankar India Culture Centre at Almora, with a galaxy of great gurus: Shankaran Nambudri in Kathakali, Kandappan Pillai in Bharatnatyam, Amobi Singh in Manipuri dance and Alauddin Khan in classical music, besides Uday Shankar's own version of dance. The training was all-

embracing: classical and folk dance, improvisation, stage and costume design, make-up, physical exercises, expressive movements, concentration, imagination, group feeling and observation, the psychology of movements, the sense of colour and line and the relationship of dance to drama.

Added to all this was his superb showmanship and perfectionism, and the sheer impact of his physical presence on stage. He transformed traditional forms into the most extraordinarily memorable works. He knew how to keep his audiences expectant, and had a remarkable gift for creating an indelible impression in a very brief span of time. His own vision of Indian gods and goddesses was breath-taking: his solo presentations of Indra, Kartikeya and Shiva still haunt those who saw them long ago.

Uday Shankar's pupil Shanti Bardhan (1916-54) was another creative dancer with a distinctive identity to the movements he created. Among his other pupils and followers, Narendra Sharma, Shachin Shankar, wife Amala Shankar, daughter Mamata Shankar, son Ananda Shankar and daughter-in-law Tanushree Shankar carry on his legacy.

Alongside the creative dance movement, inaugurated in India by Uday Shankar, the classical dance forms are well established in Calcutta and Bengal. It was Rabindranath Thakur who, having seen the Manipuri dance,

42.1 Amala Shankar
and pupil



brought over the best Manipuri gurus and exponents to Shantiniketan in 1918. Later he also brought Kathakali dancers: thus these two classical dance forms came within the experience of the Bengali intelligentsia.

In May 1926, Rabindranath presented *Nati Puja*, in which girl students trained in Manipuri dance by Nabakumar Singh took part. In 1927 *Nati Puja* was presented in Calcutta. It opened the eyes of the *bhadralok* to our heritage of dance, and laid the foundation of what has come to be known as the 'Tagore School' of dance or *Rabindrik* dance. Today there is hardly any young girl in Calcutta who does not dance to Rabindranath's songs.

But historically speaking it was in 1856, after the annexation of Awadh, that Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, then settled in Calcutta, brought with him a retinue of dancers proficient in classical Kathak dance of the Lucknow *gharana*. They passed on their art to the *baijis* and *tawaifs*. These women would dance on various occasions, including puja ceremonies in the palatial buildings of the new rich class. Kathak has been practised in Calcutta ever since then. But it was Madame Menaka (1899-1947; born Leela Ray, from Barisal in East Bengal) who gave Kathak a social acceptance among the *bhadralok*. The winds of change were blowing by her day, thanks to the vision of Rabindranath and the unprecedented success of Uday Shankar abroad.

Thus classical dance forms like Kathak, Kathakali and Manipuri took roots in Calcutta. Haren Ghosh, the eminent impresario who arranged tours for Uday Shankar, also brought over dancers from South India. Among them was Rukmini Devi Arundale, who helped immensely in popularizing Bharatnatyam. Performances by Shanta Rao and other dancers also made an impact. Though gurus like Prahlad Das had been teaching all the four major classical dance forms – Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Kathakali and Manipuri – proper training in Bharatnatyam began around 1920 after Uday Shankar started teaching at the Academy of Dance, Drama and Music of West Bengal. This later grew into Rabindra Bharati University, housed in the ancestral mansion of the Thakur family at Jorasanko.

In the 1940s there were dancers like Mani Bardhan and Sadhana Basu who, with their solo and group dances, had created an awareness among people about our dance heritage.

There was also Anandam, a Kuchipudi guru.

Of all the major Indian dance forms, it was Orissi that came to Calcutta rather late, though it had acquired fame already in the late 1950s. By the early 1950s Muralidhar Majhi, a disciple of Kelucharan Mahapatra, settled down in Calcutta and started teaching Orissi. When Uday Shankar came to teach at the Academy of Dance, Drama and Music, he brought the guru Elappa's son Gyan Prakash to teach Bharatnatyam. Other celebrated gurus were Narudappa Pillai in Bharatnatyam, Raeshwari who taught Bharatnatyam of the Tanjore school and Balakrishnan Menon, an exponent of Kathakali, who taught *Rabindrik* dance at Rabindra Bharati University till his death a few years ago.

Today Rabindra Bharati teaches all the six principal classical dance forms, as well as folk dance and creative dance. Institutions like the Kalamandalam offer training in Bharatnatyam.

Uday Shankar
and Arun Burman in
Kuchipudi, Orissa



Calcutta: The Living City

Above :
42.3 A scene from
Tomari Matir Kanya
(based on
Rabindranath)
choreographed by
Manjushri Chaki
Sarkar



Below :
42.4 The Thakur
mansion at Jorasanko,
seat of the Rabindra
Bharati University.

Kathakali and Mohini Attam. Thankamani Kutty has trained more than two generations of dancers in Bharatnatyam and Mohini Attam. Kathak was once taught by legendary gurus like Jailalji of the Jaipur *gharana* and his son Ram Gopal. Now Ram Gopal's wife Susmita and her daughter Kajal Mishra teach Kathak of the Jaipur *gharana*. Vijay Maharaj, a disciple of

Birju Maharaj, has recently been appointed a resident teacher at Padatik, where Kelucharan Mahapatra also conducts periodic workshops in Orissi. Another brilliant teacher and dancer is Om Prakash Maharaj from Ayodhya, a student of Lachchu Maharaj. In Manipuri dance, Bipinsingh's Manipuri Nartanalaya and Deb-jani Chaliha's school have attained eminence.

Folk dances have also found a place in Calcutta. The first impetus came from Gurusaday Datta's Bratachari Movement and his books on folk dance. Forms like the *chhou* of Purulia and Gambhira of Maldah have now become popular. Meanwhile, the Uday Shankar Centre of Indian Dance, run by Uday Shankar's widow Amala, another centre under Ananda and Tanushree Shankar, and a third under Mamata Shankar, carry on the legacy of Uday Shankar's school of dance. *Rabindrik* dance, needless to say, is taught at several institutions. And a recent addition to the scene is the Dancers' Guild led by that brilliantly innovative choreographer Manjushri Chaki Sarkar.

The rising generation of Calcutta dancers promises to match its predecessors' record. Many of these young men and women have already made their mark on the national and international scene. With an increasing interest in dance among the intelligentsia and more opportunities coming their way, the new generation is well geared to take up the challenges in the field of dance.





WESTERN MUSIC IN CALCUTTA



Kishore Chatterjee

When Calcutta was born three hundred years ago, none of the European composers that we hear today at concerts had appeared. What probably did exist was janissary music in some form, which through exposure to Dutch, French, Portuguese and English travellers added a touch of Baroque flamboyance over the decades and centuries to the ubiquitous Calcutta band. Bands played on land and on river, in restaurants and palaces, the Town Hall ballroom and the Government House dance floor.

One can easily imagine the exotic Turkish flavour of those early military, police and Governor's bands. They served the young sahibs sailing down the Ganga on 'budgerows', with the addition of African slaves playing the French horn. They escorted Very Important Persons on state boats. Perhaps this could be called Calcutta's equivalent of Handel's Water Music.

Music indeed became a common accompaniment to ceremonial, not only for the early sahibs but even the 'natives'. Raja Nabakrishna Deb gave a dance in 1781 on the birthday of the reigning English beauty, one Miss Wrangham. But it took time for the Indians to accept European music in a general way. The Sahibs moved more readily from the opposite direction, carrying nauch girls along with their bands and African slaves, and composing songs on their Indian experiences – early examples of

the musical fusions so popular today.

Ceremony being the rationale for music, Handel proved not surprisingly to be a popular composer. In May 1803, just half a century after his death, his oratorio *Judas Maccabeus* was performed in Calcutta 'by the boys belonging to the church and all the amateurs of Calcutta', and was encored. This vocal tradition was built up not only through the efforts of the church but the presence in the city of several ladies connected with the London stage. Thus Stendhal writes of Rossini's *Cenerentola* being performed in Calcutta in 1814.

But the musical taste of Calcuttans was not always highbrow. From Belvedere to Fort William, the favourite Calcutta amusement was nothing more serious than a song from Gilbert and Sullivan or from some forgotten English opera. In a strange land, always threatened by disease or death, Englishmen were understandably in no mood for the sonata principle. Their philosophy was frivolity, as Hicky records: 'We pushed the claret about and Mr. Bradshaw was an uncommonly pleasing singer and afforded us great amusement.' Toying with music was also the favourite diversion of Englishwomen, wives of civil servants. But these tinkering with musical instruments on lonely afternoons had the fruitful result of bringing professional music teachers to Calcutta, who changed the course of Western music in the city.

The cultivation of Western music received a

professional base and a foundation for growth when Philippe Sandre founded the Calcutta School of Music in 1915. The School fostered an interest in great European music and the motivation to perform in public. Soon the Calcutta Symphony Orchestra (CSO) was formed, the bands – Army, Police, Barrackpur, and the Governor's – merging into it. The orchestra took on soloists like Claudio Arrau, Solomon, Yehudi Menuhin, Isaac Stern, Maura Lympany and Daniel Barenboim, to name just a few of the major instrumentalists who have come and performed in Calcutta. Even after the disbanding of the CSO, the indefatigable boys of the Oxford Mission at Behala, which has a worthy tradition of cultivating Western music, have formed the nucleus of several orchestras in the city, under the inspiration of Father Matthiessen. His most distinguished pupil is Anup Bishwas, a cellist of international reputation.

Two other institutions have helped the cause of western music in Calcutta: the All India

Radio and the gramophone record industry. They created the serious listener who cherished music-making of high quality. In 1945 the Calcutta Gramophone Society was formed, with Satyajit Ray as a founder-member. Western classical music began to be popularized through the Wednesday music forums organized at Jorasanko by Indira Devi Choudhurani, the Sunday music sessions of the late Anil Gupta, and the Tuesday Club of Adil Gazder.

Although music-lovers in Calcutta complain of the paucity of concerts and even of gramophone records, there is much to satisfy them. Since Independence, Calcutta has welcomed orchestras like the London Philharmonic, the London Symphony, the Berlin Radio Symphony and the New York Philharmonic. It has attracted big-time soloists and chamber groups, as well as countless ensembles playing classical, modern and ancient European music. All this makes one feel that on the stream of music, Calcutta has travelled a long way.





FIVE DECADES OF CALCUTTA THEATRE



Kumar Roy

To understand the last fifty years of theatre in Calcutta, we must focus specially on the seminal decade of the 1940s, unparalleled in its impact on the social, political, economic and moral fabric of the nation. The Quit India Movement of August 1942 was followed by flood and famine claiming two million victims, air raids and blackouts, the advance of the INA, clandestine war activities, blackmarketing and hoarding, riots and Partition – the last accompanied by the ultimate midnight tryst with destiny on 15 August 1947. This stupefying succession of events swept away old norms and values. It was a dark, sordid age. Rabindranath's voice was stilled: there was no comparable genius to express the nation's agony. But the initial reaction over, writers and artists recovered from the stupor and faced the crisis. The drama too, like the nation itself, was at the cross-roads.

Mainstream theatre, however, clung comfortably to the set patterns of cheap entertainment – a trend still discernible in the commercial theatres of today. But there were already a few bold, responsible actors and dramatists, impatient to break away from the past and create a new social consciousness. The complex mosaic of modern Bengali theatre was first laid in the 1940s.

Shishirkumar Bhaduri (1889-1959) had dominated Bengali theatre since the 1920s. The years 1940 to 1950 demonstrated his legacy. In

what did this legacy consist? It would be idle to deny or disparage his immense contributions; but it is also true that long before his death, he had lost much of his magic spell. One reason for this may be the advent of the cinema, but that cannot be a full explanation. In quantitative terms, the public theatre was exceedingly active in the 1940s, barring the period of black-outs during the War (though there were fewer new plays, and two theatres the less, than in the previous decade). About a hundred plays were written, sixty-four of them played in the five commercial theatres: the Star, Minerva, Rangmahal, Natyabharati and Shishirkumar's Shrirangam, as well as the newly established Kalika. The number of plays almost doubled in the 1950s, though two more theatres closed down. Many famous stage personalities also died in the 1940s: Jogesh Choudhuri in 1942, Durgadas Banerji in 1943, Bishwanath Bhaduri and Ratin Banerji in 1945, Shailen Choudhuri in 1946, Nirmalendu Lahiri in 1950, as well as the leading actresses, Binodini Dasi in 1942 and Kusum Kumari in 1948.

Let us look at the plays staged at Shrirangam in the early 1940s as a sample of contemporary fare. The theatre was inaugurated in November 1941 with *Jibanranga* by a new playwright, Tarakumar Mukherji. This was followed by 'Maharshi' Manoranjan Bhattacharya's *Desh-bandhu*, Nitai Bhattacharya's *Uro Chithi* and Michael Madhusudan, Bidhayak Bhattacharya's



Taito, Sharatchandra's *Bindur Chheley* (dramatized by Debnarayan Gupta), Tulsi Lahiri's *Dukhir Iman* and Jiten Mukherji's *Parichay*.

Never before had Shishirkumar experimented with so many new plays and playwrights. Never too had so many plays directed and acted by himself failed so dismayingly to move the audience, the chief exception being *Michael Madhusudan*. Perhaps the actor's restless genius found a fit vehicle in depicting the tragic and disturbed life of Michael the Renaissance man. As the dramatist Shachin Sengupta (1892-1961) put it, no other play offered Shishirkumar a role that could touch a sympathetic chord in his heart. The general choice of unrewarding plays reflected popular taste – yet their poor reception showed how, unbeknownst, that taste had changed radically.

Shishirkumar did have other successes, like *Dukhir Iman*. Even at an advanced age, he did not shun experimentation. Yet to quote Shachin Sengupta once more, Shishirkumar 'wished to make the stream of drama flow more swiftly, but did not try to alter its course'. If this indicates his failure, it also does justice to the impact of his career and personality. In January 1959, he refused the national honour of

the title of *Padmabhushan*. Nature's aristocrat in every fibre of his being, his august, austere personality and his awesome self-respect fought against compromising in form, style or matter to arrest his declining popularity. The result was as ambivalent as one might expect. The *Natyacharya* was associated with the *Shriangam* theatre for a long fifteen years. He took his last bow on 24 January 1956; and almost unnoticed and unsung, made his exit from the world's stage on 29 June 1959.

All in all, Shishirkumar gave Bengali theatre a refinement and distinction, an almost classical grandeur, depth and sublimity. No less a man than Shambhu Mitra has said: 'My initiation, passion and attachment to dramatics sprang from native acting and production, not from any foreign inspiration. It is for this motivation that I am indebted to Shishirkumar.'

Let us now look at the plays being staged in the other commercial theatres in the 1940s:

Natyabharati: *Nursing Home*, *Sinthir Sindur*, *Plaban*, *Dui Purush*, *Pather Dak*, *Debdas*.
Minerva: *Chirantani*, *Kanta Kamal*, *Annapurnar Mandir*, *Rashtrabiplab*.

Rangmahal: *Makarshar Jal*, *Matir Ghar*, *Bish Bachhar Agey*, *Mayer Dabi*, *Ratnadeep*, *Rakter Dak*, *Tumi o Ami*, *Michael*, *Bhola Master*, *Sunny Villa*, *Ramer Sumati*, *Bingsha Shatabdi*, *Santan* (a dramatized version of Bankimchandra's *Anandamath*), *Rajpath*, *Sei Timirey*, *Banglar Pratap* (staged on 15 August 1947), *Kshudiram*.

Star: *Rani Bhabani*, *Rani Durgabati*, *Maharaj Nandakumar*, *Shata Barsha Agey*, *Kankabati Ghat*, *Swarga Hate Biday*, *Rajsingha*, *Noukadubi*.

Kalika: *Baikunther Will*, *Achal Prem*, *Ramprasad*, *Juga Debata*.

Even this cursory list shows the medley of themes: sentimental patriotism, emotional family dramas, light social comedies that evaded the serious issues of the day, historical romances with little sense of either history or romance: some flippant, some cynical, all settling down in a superficial formalism remote from actual life. There were a number of box-office successes, needless to say. Nor did the age lack able dramatists with an individual approach to man, life and society: Manmatha Ray, Shachin Sengupta, Bidhayak Bhattacharya. But all in all, the commercial theatre failed to respond to the challenges of the times.

Above :
44.1 Shishirkumar
Bhaduri in *Sita*

Below :
44.2 Manmatha Ray



What was required was a new kind of theatre, off the beaten track.

The demand was fulfilled by the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). The IPTA production of Bijan Bhattacharya's (1917-78) *Nabanna* in October 1944 cleared the path for the emergence of the 'Parallel' or 'Other' Theatre. *Nabanna* was more than a theatrical innovation: it was a moral reaction against the decadent formalism of the age, the commencement of a new theatre in which the suffering and struggle, joys, sorrows and aspirations of the downtrodden people found expression. The handout released at the performance read: 'The Indian People's Theatre Association emerged through the efforts of a band of optimistic youths at a time of terrible crisis in culture, deep frustration in national politics, at a time when the monstrous spectre of social decadence and degeneration was casting its hideous shadow.'

It is difficult for us to recapture the success and ready acceptance that *Nabanna* obtained at that time. It was rooted in the soil; it used the language of the people, it reflected the reality and the spirit of the age, and its message was delivered in dead earnest. Although loose and episodic in form, it attained an epic grace. For the first time ever, Bengali theatre offered a frank and full comment on the society we live in – ugly, confused, exploitative, 'spiritually barren and materially littered' as the manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Organization put it. *Nabanna* was one of the most authentic and humane social documents of its day. It stirred the sluggish conscience of the people.

Nabanna was staged for seven nights at Shrirangam to packed houses, and then at other auditoriums and even on makeshift stages in Calcutta parks. A report of March 1945, on a set of three performances accompanied by dances by the IPTA central squad, observed:

Never before in Calcutta had a play or a ballet been produced before such vast congregations, which brings together perhaps the country's most talented dramatic team under the joint direction of Bijan Bhattacharya and Shambhu Mitra; and the IPTA ballets directed by Shanti Bardhan have become so popular that the Calcutta public keeps on coming to see them in increasing numbers every time.

The report estimated the audience at each show as 'at least 7,000 people'.

The phenomenal success of *Nabanna* gave rise to a new Bengali drama, although the commercial theatre refused to be influenced by it. The IPTA became a force to reckon with. It fostered a host of powerful natural actors and actresses: Shobha Sen (1923–), Tripti Bhaduri (later Mitra: 1925–89), Gangapada Rasu (1910–71), Charuprakash Ghosh, Kali Sarkar (1905?–68), Kali Banerji, Mumtaz Ahmed, Bhanu Banerjee (1920–83), Sadhana Raychoudhuri (1923–), Gnanesh Mukherji, Sabitri Chatterji. One serious play appeared after another: *Bastu Bhita*, *Nayanpur*, *Janantik*, *Sanket*, *Arunodayer Pathay*, *Bhanga Bandar*, *Natun Yihudi*, *Rahumukta in jatra* form. Here new progressive playwrights like Digin Banerji, Salil Sen, Panu Pal, Anil Ghosh and Salil Choudhuri made their mark. Sudhi Pradhan established himself as a brilliant drama organizer. Mention must also be made of that wizard of lighting, Tapas Sen (1924–), and of Khaled Choudhuri, set designer and music director. Their handiwork was seen in the early plays of the Bahurupee group.

By 1947, the IPTA had ceased to function as a coherent organization. But this was not a calamity, as its former members dispersed to provide still greater stimulus for the non-professional, socially aware theatre movement. As early as 1948, Shambhu Mitra (1915–), co-director of *Nabanna* and an associate of the IPTA, formed his own group Bahurupee under the guidance of Manoranjan Bhattacharya



From the top :
44.3 Bijan
Bhattacharya in
Nabanna

44.4 Badal Sarkar

44.5 Shobha Sen in
Nabanna





Above:
44.6 Tapas Sen

Below :
44.7 Shambhu and
Tripti Mitra in *Char
Adhyay*

(1889-1954), veteran actor and freedom fighter. The choice of plays endorsed the group's overall commitment to theatre in the cause of society. The early repertoire included *Nabanna*, Tulsi Lahiri's *Pathik* and *Chhenra Tar*, and Shambhu Mitra's own *Ulukhagra*, as well as a dramatization of Rabindranath Thakur's political novel *Char Adhyay* and *Dashachakra*, an adaptation of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. But Bahurupée also explored poetic drama, discovering other aspects of Rabindranath's dramatic heritage and introducing Sophocles as well as Ibsen to the Bengali stage. A new batch of actors and actresses made their debut alongside the veterans.

Those were exciting years, with new vistas opening up not only for Bahurupée but for other groups as well. Most notable of these was Utpal Datta's Little Theatre Group (LTG). Datta (1929-) had been a member of Geoffrey Kendall's Shakespeareana, the improbable troupe that survived in India solely by acting Shakespeare in the original. In the early 1950s he switched to Bengali drama, bringing to it a new awareness of the craft of theatre. Utpal's LTG made its debut with *Sangbadik*, an adaptation of Simonov's *The Russian Question*, at the ITF Pavilion.



In the 1950s, the few halls available to the innovative group theatre were Rangmahal, Minerva, Mahajati Sadan and the Railway Institute Hall at Shealdah. But in December 1950 Bahurupée organized an unprecedented festival of three plays – *Pathik*, *Chhenra Tar* and *Ulukhagra* – on Sunday mornings at a leading commercial cinema, the New Empire. From then on till 1970, the New Empire was the venue associated with this important group.

As their range of productions reveals, Bahurupée held that man lived on two planes, the individual and the social, whose interaction was the business of their drama. This principle found historic embodiment in their production of Rabindranath's *Raktakarabi* ('Red Oleanders') in 1954 – a landmark in the history of Bengali theatre. Rabindranath's symbolic drama had made little or no inroad into the commercial theatre of his own day or later. The Bahurupée production, the first important public performance of the play, indicates the sea-change that had taken place in audience expectation. Later Bahurupée also staged Rabindranath's *Bisarjan* ('The Sacrifice') and *Raja* ('The King of the Dark Chamber').

The performances of Shambhu Mitra and his wife Tripti, in these and other productions, became legendary. They inspired a whole generation. Their achievement as directors is equally remarkable. In 1964 Bahurupée organized a seven-day festival at the New Empire. It included two new productions, Rabindranath's *Raja* and Sophocles' *Raja Oedipous*, as well as *Raktakarabi*, *Char Adhyay*, *Dashachakra*, *Putul Khela* (an adaptation of Ibsen's *The Doll's House*) and *Kanchanranga*, all under Shambhu Mitra's direction. Though it is he above all who gave Bahurupée its distinctive identity, Tripti Mitra also proved an able director, with Rabindranath's *Dakghar* ('The Post Office') and *Gharey Bairey* ('The Home and the World') as well as *Jadi Ar Ekbar* and *Aparajita* to her credit. Her own acting role in *Aparajita* was also a remarkable display of stamina and virtuosity. The true measure of her contribution appears all the more clearly now after her death in 1989.

Bahurupée completed forty years in 1988. This was fittingly celebrated by another seven-day drama festival, this time at the auditorium of the Academy of Fine Arts, now a major venue for group theatre productions. They staged two new plays under the direction of Kumar Ray (1926-) – Girish Karnad's *Yayati*

and Manoj Mitra's *Kinu Kaharer Theter*, along with five other plays: Rabindranath's *Malini*, Brecht's *Galileo*, and *Rajdarshan*, *Aguner Pakhi* and *Mister Kakatua*, which were also directed by Kumar Ray.

Meanwhile, in the 1950s and 1960s, Utpal Datta's LTG had produced Rabindranath's *Tapati*, *Achalayatan* and *Kaler Jatra*, Jyotirindranath Thakur's comedy *Aleek Babu*, Michael Madhusudan Datta's satire *Buro Shalikher Gharey Roan* and Girish Ghosh's *Siraj-ud-Daula*, as well as Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* and *Othello*. Most significantly, LTG made direct inroads into the world of commercial theatre by leasing the Minerva Theatre and successfully producing many plays of a radical nature between 1959 and 1968. *Angar*, a play about coal miners, ran for 1,150 shows. There were also *Neecher Mahal* (1959), *Pherari Phauj* (1961), *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam* (1963), *Kallol* (1967), *Manusher Adhikarey* (1968) and *Teer* (1970). The political situation in West Bengal was particularly turbulent in the late 1960s. During these years, the LTG was instrumental not only in changing the tastes and expectations of theatre-goers, but in creating a new audience in harmony with the spirit of the times.

In 1970, Utpal Datta moved out of the Minerva and formed the People's Little Theatre (PLT). He was himself a prolific writer of plays – among others, *Rifle*, *Tiner Talowar*, *Barricade*, *Duswapner Nagari*, *Danrao Pathikbar* and *Ajker Shahjahan*. Of all these plays, *Kallol* in 1967 and *Duswapner Nagari* in 1974 made a stir not only in theatrical circles but in Calcutta generally. In an unprecedented move, newspapers refused to print advertisements for *Kallol*. That was when Tapas Sen, who looked after the publicity as well as the lighting for LTG, coined the classic slogan *Kallol chalchey chalbey* ('Kallol is running and will continue', punning on the literal meaning of *kallol*, a stir or hubbub). *Duswapner Nagari* caused even more of a political stir. A performance at the Star Theatre had to be abandoned after an attack by a political party.

Utpal Datta staunchly advocated a political theatre. In the 1960s this became the programme of many non-professional groups and playwrights. Themes were chosen from all parts of the globe that afforded instances of conflict and uprisings – Cuba, Vietnam, Africa and America.

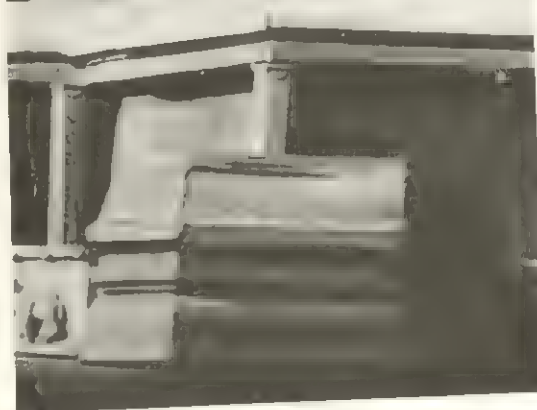
I have deliberately dealt at such length with Bahurupée and the LTG/PLT because I think



Above :
44.8 A scene from
Kallol



Below :
44.9 A scene from
Bahurupée's
Mrichchhakatik



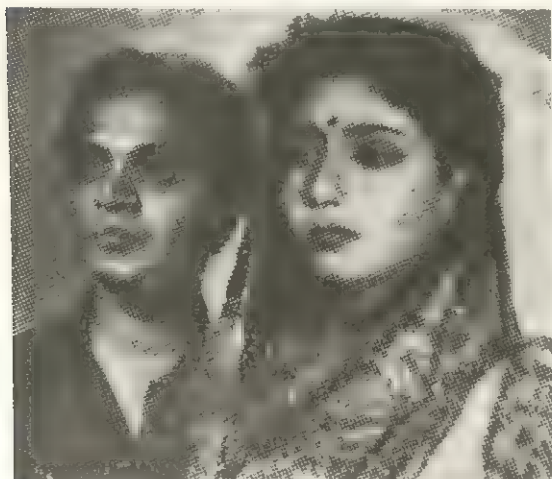


Above :
44.10 Keya
Chakrabarti and
Ajitesh Banerji in Tin
Paisar Pala

Below :
44.11 Uttam Kumar
and Sabitri Chatterji in
Shyamali

these two groups set up the two major trends in the Calcutta group theatre movement. These were reflected in the activities of many other groups of the 1960s and 1970s; among them Theatre Centre (set up in 1954), Rupakar (1955), Shoubhanik, Sundaram and Gandharba (all 1957), Theatre Unit (1958), Bijan Bhat-tacharya's Calcutta Theatre (1959), Nandikar and Mass Theatre (1960), Rupantari (1961), Theatre Workshop and Nakshatra (1966), and Chetana and Theatre Commune (1972). Many other groups were formed and disbanded; yet others are still actively engaged with tradition and experiment

The commercial theatre too took a new turn in the 1950s. The shift of serious audience-interest to the group theatre made the commer-



cial playhouses attempt consciously to recover the lost ground. Star Theatre, under Salil Mitra and Debnarayan Gupta, showed the way. Their production of *Shyamali*, commencing on 15 October 1953 with film stars Uttam Kumar and Sabitri Chatterji in the cast, broke all records of continuous runs. Rangmahal and Bishwarupa followed suit: *Ulka*, *Durabhashini* and *Kshudha* were all notable and deserving successes. But the real breakthrough came when Tripti Mitra played the leading role in *Setu* at Bishwarupa, with Tapas Sen as technical director. The play ran for over a thousand nights from October 1959 to April 1964. The group theatre had made its definitive impact on the commercial theatre. The most important features of this impact were ensemble acting rather than 'star-actor' orientation; some social awareness behind the performance; and improved techniques of production.

However, the rejuvenation of the public theatre soon came to a halt. Despite some resounding commercial successes, the 'enlightened' plays lost money. The playhouses turned to erotic and exotic themes to make good this loss. In 1971, Bishwarupa brought cabaret dancing into its production of *Chourangi*. Most commercial theatres – with the notable exception of the Star – followed suit. Small dubious theatres also mushroomed to provide a fare of sex, violence and vulgarity. The construction of a few playhouses of a more permanent nature – Rangana, Bijan Theatre, Kashi Vishwanath Mancha and Circarina in north Calcutta and Tapan Theatre in the south – was the only hopeful development. The noted film actor Soumitra Chatterji appeared on the theatrical scene as dramatist, director and hero in *Nam-jiban* at the Kashi Vishwanath Mancha in 1978. He is still keeping up this triple role on the stage besides his film career.

We must not forget that the group theatre too marked time for part of the 1970s. Hence Tarun Ray's (1927-) Theatre Centre and Shoubhanik's Mukta Angan deserve special mention, as they can proudly claim to have provided forums for the budding theatre groups in their infancy. Both these small theatres were gutted by fire, in 1964 and 1966 respectively, but soon rebuilt. We may compare how the University Institute Hall was also burnt down in the 1970s and reconstructed by the West Bengal Government to provide a fine theatre hall in central Calcutta.



Among the established performing groups in Calcutta today are Nandikar, Theatre Workshop, Chetana, Theatre Commune and Sundaram. Nandikar under Ajitesh Banerji (1933-83) first made its mark with *Natyakarer Sandhaney Chhayti Charitra* (after Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*). Ajitesh's skills as a powerful actor-director swiftly brought the group to the forefront, largely through adaptations of foreign plays – from Chekhov, Pirandello, Wesker and of course Brecht. Brecht, indeed, was extremely popular on the Calcutta stage till the early 1980s. The late Shekhar Chatterji (1924-90) deserves special mention in this context: his *Pantu Laha* and *Arturo Ui* are regarded as truly Brechtian.

In 1974, Nandikar followed the LTG by storming the commercial-theatre circuit. It rented Rangana, a new playhouse in north Calcutta, and staged *Tin Paisar Pala* (after Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*), *Nati Binodini*, *Bhalomanusher Pala* (based on Brecht's *The Good Woman of Szechwan*) and *Antigone*. The earlier plays were directed by Ajitesh; *Antigone*, like the later *Football* and *Kharir Gandhi*, by Rudraprasad Sengupta (1936-). A specially memorable feature in many of these plays was the inspired acting of Keya Chakrabarti (1942-77): her premature death was a great loss to Bengali theatre.

Ajitesh ultimately left Nandikar and founded a new group, Nandimukh, which produced *Pap Punya* (after Tolstoy's *The Power of Dark-*

ness) with Ajitesh in the lead role. This was Calcutta's last opportunity to see his spirited acting and direction: he died in 1983.

The Calcutta stage abounds in vigorous socio-political drama. Mohit Chatterji (1935-) and Manoj Mitra (1938-) are two dramatists deeply concerned with the exploitation of the common people, but they adopt very different means. Mohit's *Rajrakta* and *Mahakalir Bachcha* and Manoj's *Chak Bhang Madhu* and *Narak Guljar* provided Bibhas Chakrabarti's (1938-). Theatre Workshop with the material for some brilliant productions with memorable performances by Maya Ghosh, Ashok Mukherji and Bibhas himself. However, Bibhas broke away from the group after a fateful production of Rabindranath's *Bisarjan*; under the new banner

Above :
44.12 Bibhas
Chakrabarti and others
in Madhab Malanchi
Kainya

Below :
44.13 Manoj Mitra in
Sajano Bagan





44.14 Shaonli Mitra
in *Nathabati*
Anathabat

of Anya Theatre, he has produced his crowning achievement, *Madhab Malanchi Kainya*. Ashok, meanwhile, has produced *Bela Abelar Galpa*.

Another leading contemporary group is Chetana, led by Arun Mukherji (1937-). Their *Marich Sambad* and *Jagannath* still draw crowds. Nilkantha Sengupta's Theatre Commune followed up a modest start with *Bibhur Bagh* by their greatest success, *Dansagar* (after Premchand's *Kafan*). They also revived Dinabandhu Mitra's satirical play *Sadhabar Ekadashi*. However, here too Dwijen Banerji and Debashis Majumdar left to form a new group, Shudrak, whose masterpiece so far has been *Amitakshar*. The playwright Manoj Mitra has his own group, Sundaram, which has ably produced *Sajano Bagan*, *Mesh o Rakshas* and *Naisha Bhoj*.

It remains to discuss the work of Badal Sarkar (1925-). He grew committed to the 'Third Theatre' from the early 1970s. Before

that too, he was as involved in theatre as any other Bengali : *Ebang Indrajit*, perhaps his most inspired play, belongs to the late 1960s. He continues to depict middle-class lassitude and inertia; but there is a deeper concern for mankind in plays like *Baki Itihas*, *Shesh Nai* and *Tringsha Shatabdi* – the first and last produced by Bahurupce, along with *Pagla Ghora* and *Jadi Ar Ekbar*. From 1971 onward the Angan Mancha, run by Sarkar's own group Shatabdi, has indeed become a 'third force' in Calcutta theatre, differing from the tradition set up by either Shambhu Mitra or Utpal Datta.

In the 1980s, the most impressive additions to the scene have been Pancham Baidik and Chena Mukh. Two new serious directors have also arisen: Ramaprasad Banik and Meghnad Bhattacharya. The most memorable new production is undoubtedly Pancham Baidik's *Nathabati Anathabat*. Shaonli Mitra, Tripti and Shambhu's daughter, re-enacts the story of Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* in an amazing solo performance. Apart from the *juri* or chorus, there is no other character on stage; but the audience is held riveted right through.

I should also place on record that an academy of drama, the Paschim Banga Natya Akademi, has started functioning from 1987 under the auspices of the Cultural Department of the Government of West Bengal. The directors, actors, technicians and theatre-goers are as alert and creative as ever. At the tercentenary of Calcutta, the city's theatre is in a state of intense life, and continually renewing itself. There may be problems, but the theatrical world has the strength to confront and overcome them. Central to this vitality is the belief, basic to modern theatre in Calcutta, that drama is not merely a form of entertainment: it raises the social and political consciousness of the people.

THE EARLY YEARS OF CALCUTTA CINEMA

Samik Banerji

On 29 October 1898, Amritalal Basu (1853-1929), 'player, playwright and actor-manager' (as he described himself), screened a package of 'actualities' and 'fakes' that included the Death of Nelson, Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, and Gladstone's Funeral Procession, at the Star Theatre at 75/3 Cornwallis Street (now Bidhan Sarani). The screening was sandwiched between a performance of the play *Babu* and Miss Nelly Mountcastle dancing her snake number followed by a rainbow number. An insertion in the *Indian Daily News* dated 29 April 1899 advertised an 'opera' with 'sweet songs, charming nautches, followed by the Million's Favourite Feast, the Bioscope, exhibition of new pictures.' For next Sunday too, 'Bioscope and Dance' was appended to the scheduled play. But, warned the insertion, 'At the conclusion of his present engagement, the owner is open to dispose of the Bioscope, Pictures, and complete Plant for working.'

Obviously the first attempt to use cinema to support a tottering theatre industry had flopped, but the bioscope bonus continued at Star intermittently till early 1900. In December 1900, Ardhendusekhar Mustafi (1850-1909), yet another actor-manager, offered 'bioscope' with his production of *Praphulla* at the Minerva Theatre at 6 Beadon Street (now Dani Ghosh Sarani). Amarendranath Datta (1876-1916), perhaps the greatest showman the Bengali

theatre has ever known, went one better when, in December 1899, he offered 'our Grand Bioscope', filmed excerpts from his productions for Classic Theatre, at the Emerald at 68 Beadon Street. An announcement dated 9 February 1901 offered: 'Bioscope. Series of superfine pictures from our world renowned plays - Vramar, Ali Baba, Hariraj, Dole Lila, Buddha, Sitaram, Sarala etc.' to be 'produced to the extreme astonishment of our patrons and friends'.

Though one cannot be certain, the excerpts may have been filmed by Hiralal Sen (1866-1917), who, through his Royal Bioscope Company, had been exhibiting and shooting films since 1898. Between 1898 and 1901, the Company had exhibited imported shorts at wealthy households all over eastern India; in Calcutta, at the All-India Industrial Exhibition on 2 February 1900; the Tagore Castle of Maharaja Jatindramohan Thakur on 10 October 1901; and the Dalhousie Institute on 13 December 1901. A still photographer from 1890, with a studio of his own, at Bogjuri in Manikganj (now in Bangladesh), Sen learnt film-making as an assistant to a Pathe crew shooting in Calcutta in 1900. Of the forty-odd shorts he made in about thirteen years (he left the Company in 1913), there were excerpts from plays, actuality films, and at least two advertisements.

It is a pity that nothing has survived of Sen's work. One can only wonder why his news

45.1 Hiralal Sen



documentary on the Delhi Durbar of 1911 was not allowed to be screened, and how he could get away with a more subversive item that he advertised in 1905 as a 'genuine Swadeshi film of our own make', showing the 'Anti-Partition Demonstration and Swadeshi Movement at the Town Hall, Calcutta, on the 22nd September 1905'. The announcement ended with 'Bande Mataram'.

This seems to have been India's first 'political' film. It was quite a risky venture, given Sen's shaky beginnings in the trade – acquiring his first 'cinematograph' projector from John Range and Sons in London for five thousand rupees; bursting the rubber bag that held the oxygen to produce the limelight; tracking down Rev. Father Lafont of St Xavier's College, who helped him mend it, and then Hem Mistri who told him about the more sophisticated oxygen tank.

Sen's success in the trade was short-lived. He lost out to Jamshedji Framji Madan (1857–1923), proprietor and manager of a touring 'Parsi theatre' company. Madan entered the 'bioscope' scene in 1902, when he set up the Elphinstone Bioscope Company and began to screen films in tents set up on the Maidan and at Shyampukur.

By 1915 Madan had a string of cinema theatres—the Palace of Variety (now the Elite), the Elphinstone Picture Palace (now the Chaplin), where Uttam Kumar's father ran the projector; the Cornwallis (now Shree), the Crown (now Uttara), and the Electric Theatre (now the Regal). This led on to a string of theatres throughout India, Burma and Ceylon, and a near-monopoly on the exhibition of films. Rustamji Dotiwala, Madan's manager, made the first full-length feature film in Bengali, *Bilwamangal*, in 1919. The Madans needed a large stock of films to feed their theatres. When Hollywood imports did not suffice, they had to go in for films in Bengali and Hindi – a matter of titles only, as the films were of course silent.

Actor-directors Madhu Basu and Santosh Sinha have later recalled the Hollywood films and stars that they adored. Madhu Basu spoke of Eddie Polo and Elmo Lincoln. In his memoirs, he wrote: 'It was the dream of my life to become a hero like one of them and stun the people once for all. People would be struck dumb with wonder when I saved my heroine all by myself from a thousand dangers.' Santosh Sinha too recalled Eddie Polo's *The Broken*

Coin, and the detective serials *Fantomas* and *Lucille Love*. A generation later, Satyajit Ray had a richer choice:

Both the Globe and the Madan showed first-run foreign films, as did the Elphinstone, the Picture Palace and the Empire. They all stood clustered in the heart of Calcutta's filmland, exuded swank and boasted an elite clientele... We thus grew up on a wholesome diet of Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, Fairbanks, Tom Mix and Tarzan, with an occasional drama with a moral like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* thrown in.

But there was little of the Hollywood magic and less of its craft in Madan's films, for Madan was not quite prepared to consider cinema an art. For his first directors he chose Priyanath Ganguli, his typist, and Jyotish Banerji, his accountant. Once he came to control the two theatre companies, the Corinthian and the Alfred, he could call on his stage actors and actresses to play in his films. It was Priyanath Ganguli who spotted Shishirkumar Bhaduri (1889–1959) for Madan's new 'Bengali Theatrical Company' in 1921. Soon after his first professional stage performance in the title role of *Alamgir*, Shishirkumar directed the silent *Mohini ba Ekadashi* (1922) for Madan. While most of the early Madan films were directed by Jyotish Banerji and Priyanath Ganguli, the long list occasionally credits works to Shishirkumar (like *Kamaley Kamini*, 1924) and others.

The cast for the Madan films included some of the leading players from the contemporary Bengali professional theatre: Surendranath Ghosh (Dani Babu), Girishchandra's son, Ahindra Choudhuri, Durgadas Banerji, Shailen Choudhuri, Manoranjan Bhattacharya, Nibhanani, Prabha Devi, Nirmalendu Lahiri, and, of course, Shishirkumar himself. There was also a new breed of graceful dancing girls with some acting talent, mostly from Calcutta's Anglo-Indian community, like Patience Cooper, Renée Smith (Sita Devi on the screen), and Effie Hippolet (Indra Devi).

Most contemporary reviews and comments point to the 'stagey' overacting and clumsiness of these films that, according to Santosh Sinha, were practically directed by the cameraman. Shooting conditions were deplorable. Kanan Devi (1916–), who made her debut in a silent Madan film, *Jaydeb* (1926), went to the Madan Studio (on the site of the present Indrapuri Studio) by tram, and was paid five rupees at the end of the day. In an interview, she recalled:

From the top
45.2 Nirmalendu
Lahiri



45.3 Nibhanani Debi



Shooting was just hell. There was no scope for speech. One could only throw about one's limbs and pretend to speak. There were numerous rehearsals before every take... We had to act under the scorching sun, with the sunlight reflected from enormous mirrors literally hurled at our faces... It was difficult to keep one's eyes open in all that dazzle. The make-up came off, melting in the heat of the sun.

Madhu Basu, who directed Rabindranath's *Giribala* (1929) and *Dalia* (1930) for Madan, corroborates this account in his memoirs. A film took about four months in the making.

Once Madan Theatres had set the model, new producers and studios appeared on the scene. Anadi Basu (1884-1946) collaborated with cameraman Debi Ghosh to set up the Aurora Cinema Company in 1911, and with G. Rama Sheshan in 1929 for the Aurora Film Corporation, still going strong: the only surviving establishment from the silent era of the cinema. At first Aurora offered packages of fantasies, comic interludes and jungle pictures, all two-reelers and mostly from Pathe, to the tea gardens in Orissa, Assam and North Bengal as well as the theatres in north Calcutta. Charu Ghosh, who operated the projector, was also a magician who supplemented the film show with his own performance. Aurora went into filmmaking with two cameras sold off by Hiralal Sen when he wound up.

In film-making, Aurora broke new ground in several areas. Madan's priorities had been commercial; Anadi Basu showed more enterprise, imagination and improvisation, and had the determination to withstand the resistance put up by Madan. Aurora did not have a studio of its own till 1936; but there was a makeshift laboratory where Anadi and Charu Ghosh put together impressive special effects. Aurora produced a series of newsreel documentaries of significant contemporary events, a tradition that it carried into the period of the talkies. Its archives are an important source for filmed material on pre-Independence Bengal. The Aurora newsreels have documented Congress sessions, several of Rabindranath's public appearances, and Subhashchandra Basu's address to a rally.

The directors that Aurora chose for its silent feature films, however, were still actor-directors from the professional theatre like Ahindra Choudhuri (1895-1974) and Jogesh Choudhuri (1886-1941). The one notable ex-



From the top
45.4 Durgadas
Banerji in
Ramchandra

ception was Niranjan Pal (1889-1959), who had begun his filmmaking career in London in 1913. Before joining Aurora, he had 'discovered' Himanshu Rai (1892-1940) in London and scripted *Light of Asia* (1925), *Shiraz* (1928) and *Throw of Dice* (1929), all starring Himanshu Rai in the lead and directed by the German Franz Osten (1876-1956). Pal shot Aurora's 'oft-quoted' newsreel of Rabindranath's funeral.

Dhirendranath Ganguli, known as 'DG' (1893-1978), another pioneer of Calcutta cinema, trained as a painter at the Jubilee Art Academy and the Government Art School in Calcutta. He had a natural talent for mimicry, showed early interest in acting, make-up and photography, and found his first creative release in a series of books beginning with *Bhabar Abhibyakti: Expressions and Caricatures - 100 Pictures in all, Expressions of a Graduate or a Passed B.A. - 24 Laughing Scenes of Delightful Humour*, and *Biye*. In these, DG appeared in sequences of photographs with weird make-up and weirder 'expressions', often the product of 'trick' shots. After a short spell as a teacher at the Nizam's Art College in Hyderabad, DG returned to Calcutta to team up with Nitish

45.5 Niranjan Pal

45.6 Madhu Basu





Above :
45.7 Dhirendranath
Ganguli

Below :
45.8 Pramathesh Barua
and Jamuna Barua in
Debdas

Lahiri and cameraman Jyotish Sarkar, both of whom broke away from the Madans, and P.N. Datta, to set up the Indo-British Film Company that produced three silent feature films in 1921-22.

DG's new company broke the monopoly of the Madans when it released its first film, *England Returned* or *Bilatpherat* at the Russa Theatre (now Purna) on 2 February 1921. In several interviews later in life, DG described Chaplin as his model; a contemporary review appreciated his imitation of Chaplin's 'expressions' in *Bilatpherat*, a satire on Indians failing to adjust to their homeland on their return from England. The film recovered its investment from the three-month first run at Russa, and was sold on the Bombay circuit for a little more than what it cost before the rest of its area rights were bought up by Madan himself.

However, the initial success was not quite enough to sustain DG and his company beyond two more films: the mythological *Jashodanandan* (1922), and *Sadhu ki Shaitan* (1922), described in the announcements as an 'unprecedentedly hair-raising modern film' about a sadhu who 'forgets God and falls under the spell of a beautiful woman'. The publicized scenes included 'a fight within a well, a snakecharmer with his performing snakes, the

beautiful Nagina under a train, the soul of the sadhu, a human sacrifice in a temple, the sadhu in flames.' For all their cultural pretensions and DG's cherished links with Rabindranath, he and his friends were obviously bent on making a quick buck by trying out all the formulae of commercial filmmaking. But the effort failed, and the company collapsed soon after. The adventurous DG went to Hyderabad once again to set up the Lotus Film Company. Here too, after some initial success, DG had to close shop in 1924, when his *Razia Begum* hurt religious sensibilities and the Nizam withdrew his patronage.

Back in Calcutta again, DG teamed up with four 'rajas', including Pramatheshchandra Barua, to form the British Dominion Films Limited. In the late twenties, with the colourful DG at the helm, the company drew cinema out of the commercial entertainment discourse to re-locate it, at least formally, within the nationalist discourse that was defining itself in Bengal against the Gandhi wave spreading across north India. Deshapriya Jatindramohan Sengupta opened the company's studio and laboratories at 40 Dum Dum Road on 21 May 1929.

If the subjects are any indication, DG was aiming more closely this time at the Bengali *bhadralok* sensibilities : significantly enough, the last British Dominion Films production was the first of Sharatchandra Chatterji's novels on screen, *Charitraheen* (1931). Pramathesh Barua (1903-51) and Debakikumar Basu (1898-1971), the two actor-directors 'discovered' by DG's company, continued in films and developed a typically Bengali *bhadralok* cinema – Pramathesh projecting the individual against social orthodoxy, Debaki Basu at his best in evoking an ambience of faith almost as a kind of warning to the more secularist pretensions of the *bhadralok*.

But even as British Dominion Films faltered, and the sound film made its revolutionary appearance, a cinema culture was slowly emerging in Calcutta. The liberal *bhadralok* who had scorned cinema for years were at last taking serious notice of it. Hemendramohan Basu or 'H. Bose' (1865-1916), the pioneering Bengali industrialist and patron of the arts, was one of the first of this class to have his own projector at home; Leela Majumdar, the well-known writer, recalls seeing Chaplin films there in 1913, when she was five years old. Satyajit Ray,



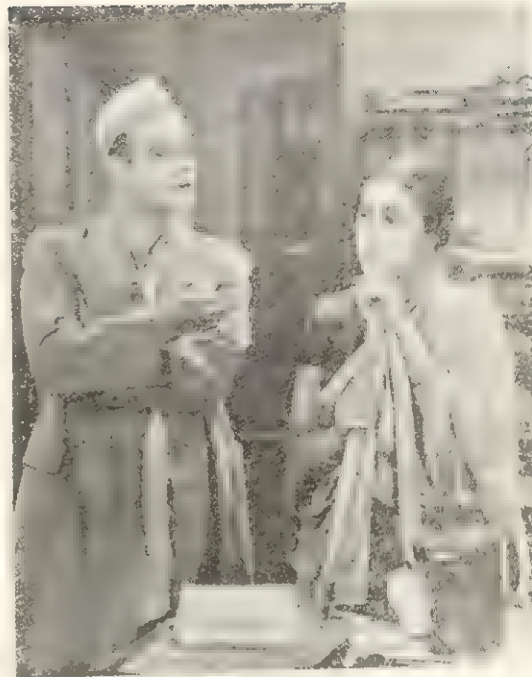
related to the Basus, recalls seeing at the same house, some time later, a film about a *kheda* of elephants in Assam shot by Hemendramohan's son Nitin, who became a major filmmaker later on.

In a historic letter dated 26 November 1929, Rabindranath Thakur wrote to Murari Bhaduri, a brother of Shishirkumar's:

An art form defines itself in terms of its medium. It is my conviction that the new art form that should have emerged out of reflected pictures is still not in sight... The reflected pictures are still sycophants to literature; for there is still no artist who can liberate it by the touch of his genius from this bondage. It is a hard task, for... reflected pictures demand capital and not merely creative talent. The main thing about the reflected pictures is the mobility of scenes. The beauty and grandeur of the moving form needs to be projected in a manner that would allow the art to fulfil itself without any recourse to words. If there has to be a language peering over the shoulders of its own natural language to point its finger to the meaning, then it only goes to prove it lame.

One does not know if Birendranath Sarkar ('B.N. Sircar') was aware of this little-known letter. But his approach to the mechanics of filmmaking showed the same concern for the artistic fulfilment of cinema within the matrix of a commercial system. Unlike DG who had gone for rich, feudal patrons, Birendranath (1901-80), an Advocate-General's son and London-trained civil engineer, teamed up with another engineer, P.N. Ray; Haren Ghosh (1895-1947), Bengal's first impresario; Amar Mallik (1898-1972), a friend from London days who proved to be a remarkable character actor, and of course Nitin Basu (1897-1986).

Birendranath, who dominated the Calcutta cinema scene through the thirties and forties, can be a case study for the place of cinema in Calcutta's cultural and economic life. But his rise displayed something of the inspired amateurism that has characterized most creative enterprises in Calcutta and eventually determined their fate. Haren Ghosh the impresario, who had 'sold' Uday Shankar, the Seraikela Chhau, Shanta Rao and the Manipuri dancers to the world, 'sold' to Birendranath a film Nitin Basu was making for him. Beginning as a financier baling out a friend, Birendranath stayed on to become part of the industry. With *Buker Bojha* flopping miserably, he turned to the economics of the trade, and began to set up



an organization that could take flops in its stride.

His first step was to build two theatres – Chitra, formally opened on 30 December 1930 by Subhashchandra Basu; and the New Cinema, for Hindi films, in a more cosmopolitan part of the city, inaugurated by Sharatchandra Chatterji soon after. Towards the end of 1930, in association with P.N. Ray, Birendranath established the International Filmcraft Company. Charu Ray (1890-1971), who directed the first International Filmcraft film, *Chorkanta* (1931), had begun as journalist and artist, gone on to design Shishirkumar Bhaduri's path-breaking production of *Sita*, joined Himanshu Rai's company as art director for his *Light of Asia*, and acted in the Osten-Rai films *Shiraz* and *Throw of Dice*. Working with Osten and Rai, Charu Ray had learnt the craft and brought to his films a greater concern for the cinematic. As he later told an interviewer, 'Osten had taught me to see the difference between a play and a film script, and had helped me analyse the film script.'

Six years after *Chorkanta*, Charu Ray was to make *Bangali* (1936), a quiet, close, objective look into middle-class domesticity in Calcutta. When the film turned up again in the sixties, it proved to be quite a discovery. Satyajit Ray pronounced it the 'one exception' among the many films of the time that 'failed to reach the standards achieved by Hollywood, and yet

Above :
45.9 Pramathesh
Barua and Kanan Debi
in Shesh Uttar

Below :
45.10 Debaki Basu



persisted in copying the Hollywood films blatantly in several respects... There were few directors who dared to project before their audiences an image of Bengali life at its natural.' The only exception, declared Satyajit, was *Bangali*; and from the 'few stills' he had seen of Charu Ray's other films, he judged that this direction, alone in his age, 'had been able to steer clear of the influence of Hollywood.'

For their second film, *Chashar Meye*, released five months after *Chorkanta*, International Filmcraft had Praphulla Ray (1891-1971) for director. The novelist Premankur Atarathi contributed the original film-script. Atarathi was only the first of a whole string of eminent Bengali novelists that Birendranath commissioned to write scripts or even direct some of the films. But both the films flopped. Birendranath, undaunted, went on to set up New Theatres, a full-fledged film production company, inaugurated on 10 February 1931. Active till 1954, when it folded up with *Bakul*, 'B.N. Sircar's' New Theatres with its celebrated elephant logo nurtured a *bhadralok* cinema that upheld the traditional personal and family values, only occasionally extended to larger social spaces. While Pramathesh Barua, himself the aristocratic 'bohemian', introduced the figure of the self-marginalized rebel. Nitin Basu touched a nobler streak of idealism when he made his characters bring modern technology to the villages or stand by a victim of tuberculosis, still considered an 'untouchable' disease, to nurse him back to health.

Quite a dominating personality, Birendranath sought with some success to organize film-making into a foolproof system. William Demming Jr, an American technician who worked for New Theatres in the early 1930s, wrote in *American Cinematographer*:

Calcutta provided a complete surprise, contrasting with the rushing, haphazard methods of Bombay. Here I was presented with the nucleus of what has become a real production unit, well financed and with an ambitious programme of producing pictures for India comparable to those of the independent Hollywood companies.

'B.N. Sircar' charted out a programme for a popular Bengali cinema providing wholesome entertainment, with songs and stars as principal attractions. Within a few years he had travelled a long way from Raichand Baral conducting the orchestra personally at Chitra during the

screening of *Chorkanta* and *Chashar Meye*, to the discovery of playback technology for *Bhagyachakra*, for which he was indebted to his sound recordist Mukul Basu, son of Hemendramohan Pramathesh Barua was the first star thrown up by New Theatres. K.L. Saigal and Kanan Devi were the first singing stars. With its cult of respectability, New Theatres could draw on the best talents in every area of the complicated process of filmmaking, but most of its products remained predictable once the ingredients had been reduced to formulae.

It is difficult to explain the failure of New Theatres. Birendranath seems to have had the right kind of idealism and the right professionalism. Writing his memoirs in 1971, he said:

Personally, I would like to say with all humility and without a touch of pride that I have never made films with the idea of becoming rich. My only objective was to experiment with the new art medium and build up a successful production unit with the semblance of an art industry... We knew and respected the director to be all-in-all in the scheme of filmmaking; for, in fact, he was the filmmaker.

But technical competence and productional discipline were not enough to sustain the organization artistically and commercially. Birendranath had an explanation for the commercial failure: it was 'entirely due to my weakness and foolishness. I was inclined to idealism and constantly stuck to my principles. Perhaps New Theatres would have survived, had I, for the sake of the organization, curtailed some excess in the face of the deepening financial crisis.' But he had no explanation for the banality of most of the New Theatres films. Some of the really interesting films of the period were made outside New Theatres. *Bangali* is a case in point; two others are Madhu Basu's *Ali Baba* (1937) and Shishirkumar Bhadhuri's *Chanakya* (1938).

There was indeed something in the Calcutta culture evolved under colonialism that held the Bengali cinema back. The ready model that it adopted was the second-rate Victorian theatre, planted in Calcutta towards the middle of the nineteenth century. It was a theatre grotesquely inhibited about using the body as a medium of expression, and therefore totally given over to emoting through verbal modulations and facial expressions. Words – often facile and pretentious – with 'emotional' faces and songs for

45.11 The New Theatres logo



relief, become the staple of Bengali cinema. This commitment to the so-called legitimate theatre, although hidden under literary pretensions by the employment or exploitation of literary men and literary texts, shut the film-makers away from the potentials of the cinematic form, even as their effort to reach out to the *bhadralok* clientele failed miserably, for literature and politics had already come to dominate the perception of this target audience. The thirties in Calcutta saw the development of a modern Bengali literature in both poetry and fiction, and the emergence of a nationalist discourse identifying itself against the Gandhian discourse. The cinema of the times, in terms of ideas, belonged to a period that was long past.

Ali Baba and *Chanakya*, and the recently discovered *Jamaibabu* (1931) directed by Kalipada Das, score by keeping off ideas and sentiments, and celebrating unashamedly a theatrical tradition that is essentially theatrical. The three films, different in many ways from one another, share a common understanding of and respect for theatre that would not allow their makers to hide the theatricality behind the mechanics of cinema. In their acknowledgement of the theatrical, they lay down non-realistic and anti-illusionistic norms. The freedom of slapstick in an urban setting in *Jamaibabu*; the fantasy and musicality of *Ali Baba*; and the magic of historical spectacle in Shishirkumar Bhaduri's *Chanakya*, represent three distinct triumphs of style. There was no way theatre could be absorbed in cinema: it could work in cinema only if it was allowed to work as theatre. This aesthetic realization lay beyond Birendranath Sarkar's scope. The Bengali writers who served the industry in the thirties and forties could have lent it their brains; but they chose to use it exclusively as a source of income. Among the men of the cinema, Charu Ray stood alone in imbibing the influence of not only Osten but other German film-makers like Fritz Lang, Pabst and Murnau.

It was the overall internationalization of Calcutta culture in the War years that changed the course and ultimately the nature of Bengali cinema to a great extent. The historic IPTA stage production of Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* affected its first viewers by its sentimental immediacy rather than by its immense originality as theatre. Once the *Nabanna* experience was transferred to cinema in *Dharti ke Lal*, one could see that those who admired *Nabanna*

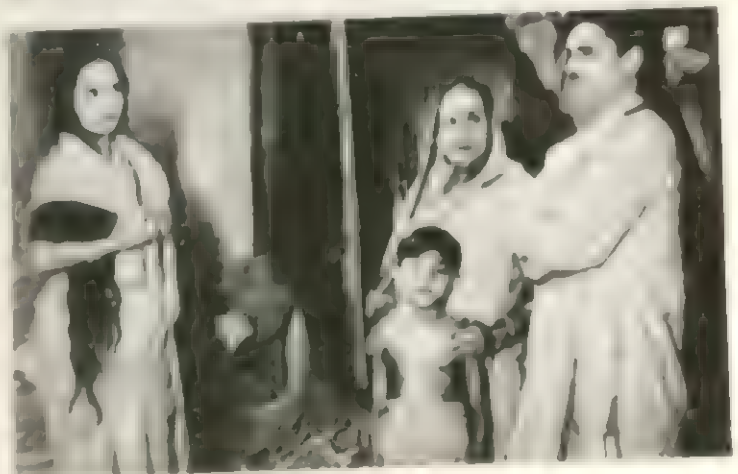


had failed to see where it challenged and attacked the Victorian dramaturgy that dominated both theatre and cinema in the early forties. *Dharti ke Lal* stands as a sad testimony to the sheer insensitivity of its makers, redeemed only in parts by the brilliant performances of Tripti Mitra and Balraj Sahu. It was left to Nimai Ghosh in *Chhinnamul* (1951) to capture the essence of the *Nabanna* experience for the cinema, with his ruthlessly authentic documentation of the migration from eastern Bengal to Calcutta after 1947, as well as his realization of the fictional and dramatic potentials rooted in that larger historical narrative. In a sense, Ghosh's film 'discovered' the city of Calcutta in a manner unknown in earlier cinema, as he showed the city trying to come to terms with the massive influx of people, at various concrete and definite points like Shealdah Station and the military barracks converted to refugee camps along the Lakes.

As Nimai Ghosh later explained, he wanted his film to be 'experimental in six different

45 12 A scene from
Chhinnamul

45 13 A scene from
Nagarik



ways'. He did not call in any professional actors: half his artistes came from the IPTA, the other half were actual refugees, and neither group had ever faced a camera. He used no make-up except for some whiskers. He completed the film within as little as 10,000 feet, because he 'wanted to be as precise and crisp as possible'. He used no songs: when people protested, 'I only exclaimed, how can they sing while they are dying'. Fifthly, he filmed *Chhinnamul* by the concealed camera method. And lastly, 'the dialogue was mostly homespun'.

The Calcutta Film Society had already come into being, in 1947. In an interview Nimai Ghosh acknowledged his debt to the Society, which had a 16 mm print of *The Battleship Potemkin*. It is significant that Pudovkin and Cherkasov, visiting Calcutta in 1951, saw *Chhinnamul* and complimented Ghosh in a letter: 'a genuine realism comes into its own for the first time in Indian cinema with your outstanding film, and we hope that Indian cinema will develop now in that direction.'

Before the two Russians, Jean Renoir had visited Calcutta, shooting in and around the city for his film *The River* (1950). Renoir had a more direct impact on the new generation of filmmakers that emerged in Calcutta in the fifties. Bansi Chandra Gupta, who became art director for Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy*, made the sets for *The River*; and Ramananda Sengupta, who later shot *Ganga* for Rajen Tarafdar and *Nagarik* for Ritwik Ghatak, was the cameraman. Nimai Ghosh, Satyajit Ray and Subrata Mitra saw the master at work and drew

inspiration from their conversations with him.

But the international cinema made its truly lasting impact during the International Film Festival in Calcutta in 1952. Mrinal Sen recalled the event years later. He was a medical representative at the time, with no links with the cinema except 'an impossible hope that some time in the future I would get into movies'. But like the rest of the city's film enthusiasts, he kept

running...from one theatre to another religiously watching the wonder that was post-War world cinema. The Calcuttans thus became very active; they became more demanding, and the 'contagion' spread in the air, which partially invaded the film studios, 'corrupting', so to say, the younger technicians. And at last in 1955, after years of stress and strain, the greatest event in the history of Indian cinema took place: the making of *Pather Panchali*.

The fifties in Calcutta demanded a new art form, and found it in the new cinema as defined by Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak. Disillusionment with the post-colonial administration grew in Calcutta at a faster pace than in other parts of India.

The new cinema emerged as the medium that could best reflect the complexity of the situation. The exposure to Italian Neo-realism at the 1952 Festival, and its absorption into a fabric more loosely woven out of earlier responses to the Soviet cinema of the twenties (known and seen in Calcutta already), provided the possibility of a cinema that could look closely, critically and ironically at the changing social and political scene from the distinctive sensibility of a city and a class created by colonialism yet struggling continuously against it both internally and externally.

Satyajit, Ritwik and Mrinal in the first wave of Calcutta's new cinema; Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Gautam Ghosh, Aparna Sen and Utpalendu Chakrabarty in the second; with Tapan Sinha, Rajen Tarafdar, Tarun Majumdar and others alongside them, have by now evolved a Bengali cinema that is essentially a product of this city with its sentimental attachment to a community life, its artistic and intellectual predilections, its not too strident radicalism, its internationalism, its inspired amateurism that allows it to play with technology. The city has almost always been at the centre of the typical 'new' Bengali film, even when it has looked at a village or some more 'primitive' setting. The

45.14 The young rice-smugglers in Calcutta' 71





45.15 Chhunibala Debi
and Uma Dasgupta in
Pather Panchali

Apu Trilogy presented the history of the Bengal village sending its children to the big city and losing them to the city; Ritwik's *Subarnarekha* retold the story in more sharply melodramatic terms; Mrinal's *Ekdin Pratidin* and *Kharij* studied the Calcutta middle class, now settled in the city, in terms of its moral codes; so did Aparna Sen in *Parama*, centering more closely on the woman, and Buddhadeb in *Duratwa*, *Grihajuddha* and *Andhi Gali*, closing in on morality in politics.

In his Calcutta films – *Pratidwandi*, *Seemabad-dha*, *Jana Aranya*, *Pikoo*, and the earlier *Mahana-gar*, Satyajit Ray recorded the liberal observer's shock at the sad decline of the moral values of the city under the growing power of a ruthlessly commercial establishment. Mrinal Sen took an even closer look at the politics behind and in it, in *Calcutta 71* and *Padatik*, with a harsher

view of the violence that the state represented. But the story of the new Bengali cinema must be told separately.

Cinema in Calcutta has always been plagued by economic constraints. In a talk in 1958, Ritwik Ghatak said: 'Look at the sheer magic that we are producing with the worthless equipment that has been our inheritance, the golden harvest that we have brought to blossom...' The film-makers who created that inheritance had an even more difficult path to traverse than those to whom it descended. Indeed, it is hard for us even to recover the details of that experience. With barely thirty-odd films surviving out of about 500 produced in Calcutta in the 1930s and 1940s, there is just no way we can make a proper assessment of the cinema of that period, which tends to grow into a myth that obscures its outlines still further.



MODERN CALCUTTA CINEMA



Moinak Biswas

It is customary to date the modern era of Bengali cinema from Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955). *Pather Panchali* undoubtedly marks a radical break in the chronicle. However, this is commonly taken to imply that no film worth the name was made earlier, that there were craftsmen and artisans but no artists in the business. Only if we get over this artist-demiurge fixation shall we be able to see what was really new in *Pather Panchali*.

As a work of art, *Pather Panchali* was far superior to any earlier film. But for the student of film history, what was even more important was the idea of cinema that it embodied. In the cultural context of every nation, cinema has had to come to terms with realism of form, with the medium's own realistic potential. It has never established itself as an art form without resolving this particular praxis. *Pather Panchali*, and the Satyajit Ray canon that followed, put the case firmly for realist cinema as real cinema.

Looking back, we can trace a line along which realism was developing in Bengali cinema: through Charu Ray's *Bangali* (1936), Bimal Ray's *Udayer Pathey* (1944), Nimai Ghosh's *Chhinnamul* (1951), Hemen Gupta's '42 (1951), Ritwik Ghatak's *Nagarik* (1952), Salil Sen's *Natun Yehudi* (1953), Satyen Basu's *Rickshaw-walla* (1955) and Shambhu Mitra and Amit Maitra's *Ek Din Ratrey* (1956). *Pather Panchali* consolidated a great deal of their realist aspirations, while at the same time negating some basic attitudes underlying them. Their natur-

alistic tendencies were now shaped into an organic wholeness of perception: life was captured not only in its dramatic polarities but its effervescence, its unguarded moments. The nascent critical realism of films like *Chhinnamul* or *Nagarik*, inspired by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), was discarded in favour of a lyrical realism. Indeed, after *Pather Panchali* the makers of these earlier films themselves discarded their former principles. Ritwik, for instance, had to redefine realism entirely for himself when he took to films again.

The humanism of *Pather Panchali* has been much talked about. This was what drew Satyajit's realism away from the earlier concentration on topical social reality. In his books (*Our Films, Their Films* in English, *Bishay Chalachchitra* in Bengali), Satyajit (1921-) argues for a 'cinema of details' which would portray life in its perennial values, among other things. His later films gave this humanism an integrated classicist expression which could be attributed as much to his dialogue with classic European and Hollywood models (the cinema of *découpage classique* as the French called it) as to that with the heritage of Rabindranath Thakur. The humanism of *Pather Panchali* has informed the whole corpus of Satyajit's work, and was an inseparable part of the realism it ushered in. Here man is at the centre, locus of all meaning, repository of faith and hope, vehicle of progress. The world is rationally explicable, cohe-

rent; it always *means* in human terms.

The quiet dignity of human beings in *Pather Panchali*, the deeply and rhythmically articulate life amidst poverty and squalor, attained a ring of truth by its careful postulation of nuances moderating the contrasts. The 'slice of life' was organically integrated to the total form not only through editing and music but through the fully articulated *mise-en-scène*.

In the commercial cinema, the countryside had been turned into a mythical idyll. The deep nostalgia for rural Bengal in *Pather Panchali* was offered as a corrective to that approach. By the time the film appeared, however, Bengal rural life had been shaken to its roots by war, famine and Partition. For the urban Bengali audience, the film was both an acceptance of reality and a refusal to accept it. Its realism was not only a matter of narrative representation: its integrity of form helped to frame reality here — rural reality — as it was conceived by the urban people. This was the time when Calcutta was becoming more and more insular in relation to the countryside.

This classic brand of humanism had already been extensively worked, and was indeed dying out, in other art forms like literature, painting, and to some extent the theatre. But it had a creative resurgence in Satyajit's films: as so often, the cinema revitalized the set outworn conventions, both social and artistic, of other art forms. But the same classical humanism was to lose its vigour and become a source of constriction in Satyajit's later work.

Pather Panchali also started the appropriation of cinema as a form of 'high art' by the Bengali *bhadralok*. Film-going now became respectable: the urban intelligentsia could exercise a choice in cinema as in other arts. This taste became firmly dismissive of all the vulgar codes of music, dancing, costume and histrionic panache. Suggestion and subtle wit, economy of expression and lyrical understatement became hallmarks of cinematic literacy.

The objective conditions behind this polarity are well-known. Satyajit and his team had to fight against deep-seated ignorance and apathy. The studios of Tollyganj churned out some fifty films a year in those days (49 precisely in 1955). Most of these were melodramas, then being weaned away from the Pramathesh Barua school to the era of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. There were also the 'mythologicals', though decreasing in number; and comedies of

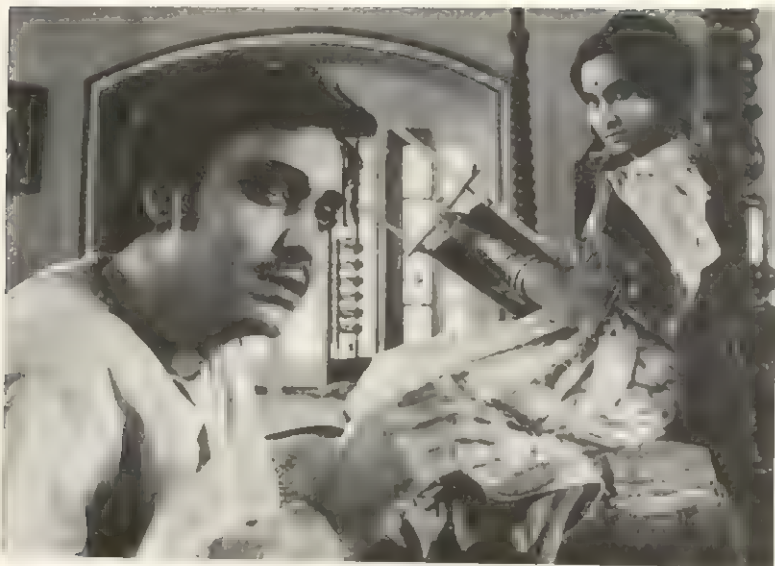


occasional freshness and vigour like Nirmal Dey's *Basu Paribar* (1952) and Sarey Chuattar (1953). 46.1 Kanu Banerji and Karuna Banerji in *Pather Panchali*

Moreover, the entrepreneur-speculator was again dominating the film industry, as at the time of its inception. In the 1930s and 1940s, the era of big studios like the New Theatres, the producer was the key figure; there was a regular, balanced cycling of capital in the industry, with some scope for experimentation. After the Second World War the studios broke down; actors and technicians obtained an equivocal independence; and the producer, also independent, stalked the studios with a bagful of suspect money. The distributor-exhibitor nexus consolidated its power in this blind market game. The 'genre' was ritualized into formula at the cost of the 'author': now any hack could make a film, and innovation became unthinkable.

The national and international success of the new cinema of the 1950s fostered the rise of a wave; but it had to face formidable resistance from the industry and apathy from the major part of the public. In such a situation, the schism between 'high' and 'low' cinema could not but grow pronounced.

The wave started in an atmosphere of internationalism. The founding of the Calcutta Film Society in 1947 by Satyajit Ray, Chidananda Dasgupta, Harisadhan Dasgupta *et al*; Jean Renoir's visit in 1949 to film *The River*; and the International Film Festival of 1952 were the major landmarks on Calcutta's path of discovery of world cinema. The Federation of Film Societies was founded in 1959. Film Societies



Above
46.2 Soumitra
Chatterji and Madhabi
Mukherji in *Charulata*

Below :
46.3 Chhabi Bishwas
and Sharmila Thakur
in *Debi*



now took on the task of creating an audience for the new films.

The two other major directors of the wave, Ritwik Ghatak (1925-76) and Mrinal Sen (1923-) were products of the IPTA Movement as much as of the new film culture. Ritwik's maiden venture *Bedeni* (1951-52), like many of his later works, was a non-starter; *Nagarik* (1952) never saw the light of day in his lifetime. He had to wait till 1958 to make an impression. Mrinal Sen started in 1955 itself with *Rat Bhor*, starring the popular Suchitra-Uttam duo, but he too did not make his mark till much later.

Meanwhile, the new cinema looked to Satyajit Ray as its lone giant. In 1956 Satyajit made what is arguably his finest film, *Aparajita*, the second part of the Apu Trilogy. For once he moved towards the borders of tragedy. The narrative line was orchestrated: silence and space disturbed the causal sequence of images. Gently dismissing the spiritual overtones of Bibhutibhushan Banerji's original novel, Satyajit orients the story as a tragedy that stems both from a specific order of life and from the human condition itself. The film has a cruelty not to be found later in Dayamayi's predicament in *Debi* (1960) or Charu's in *Charulata* (1964). Apu attains manhood at the cost of his mother's sacrifice: their relationship hovers on the brink of the irrational. Apu's transcendence of guilt, his reassertion of faith and renewal of his mission come through a final confrontation with nature (the constellation Orion reflected in water), touching a dimension beyond the human, acquiring cosmic reverberations. The soundtrack gained an unprecedented independ-

ence in *Aparajita*. Satyajit and his music director Ravi Shankar made the track almost a metaphor for the musically-ordered visual structure.

In 1956 Shambhu Mitra (1915-) and Amit Maitra made *Ek Din Ratrey*, a social satire with Raj Kapoor in the lead. The Hindi version, *Jagtey Raho*, won the Grand Prix at Karlovy Vary. In 1958, before embarking on the third part of the Apu Trilogy, *Apur Sangsar* (1959), Satyajit Ray too tried his hand at comedy in *Parashpathar*. His humour, usually restrained, grew boisterous here, depicting a world that goes mad over the discovery of the philosopher's stone. The milieu was middle-class and lower-middle-class Calcutta life, stripped of all sentimentality even while restored to its indomitable spirit of caricaturing its own anachronistic existence.

In some later films (*Mahanagar*, 1963; *Pratidwandi*, 1970; *Jana Aranya*, 1975) Satyajit deals with the same class. He gradually accepts its anomalies as signs of decadence; but never again do its collective dreams erupt with the bizarre festive splendour of *Parashpathar*. The last great Chekhovian touch in his observation of the middle class was perhaps in *Jana Aranya*. We may recall one sequence in particular: two unemployed young men, observing the sprawling urban comedy around them on the Maidan, identify the quintessential office clerk in the crowd. The *kerani* is presented to us in a long shot: stooping, puny against the towering though squalid cityscape, trudging home after a nine-to-five day.

We look to the cinema, we look at the screen in search of a totality of experience that the social conditions governing the medium so often deprive us of. At the time of which we are speaking, the television had not appeared to reconstruct the home, addressing the viewer with a universe peopled by commodities. Satyajit's films restored a sense of grace and order to Bengali life, riddled with incongruities. Commercial cinema, on the other hand, had always presented an integrated world by the simple process of suppressing its incongruities. A primary function of myth is to offer familiarity and predictability. The formula film achieved this by suppressing all alternative possibilities of story and form. The family, the main arena of conflict in these films, provided a 'total' milieu along these lines: an ideological apparatus that is never questioned, solving all problems within its own confines. Society was

presented as an extension of this arena, though with more abstract alignments of power. The individual grew vacuous, a mere ideal or type. Poverty was idolized but finally negated with the hero's success in the bourgeois game of competition, while the countryside provided the ultimate sustaining idyll, a repository of all lost values. Bikash Ray's *Surjyamukhi* (1955) and Pinaki Mukherji's *Dhuli* (1954) typify this class of films. The first is a saga of sacrifices for the family by a woman who, 'defiled' by the mere touch of a man after her marriage, goes through an ordeal of fire to cleanse herself. The second tells the story of a country boy, tragically assailed by evil urban forces but redeemed by returning to his native village.

Seen in this context, it is easier to understand why Ritwik Ghatak was so largely misunderstood and rejected in his lifetime. Firstly, Ritwik's very theme was the disintegration of a society that wished to disown its history: he did not frame tradition as past and dead, nor did he limit his vision to lyricism. Secondly, the epic form of cinema that he contemplated, attempting reintegration through a total presentation of experience, incorporated all the ingredients of romantic melodrama. It looked beyond realism, questioned its metaphysical assumptions. People break into song in his films, performances verge on the theatrical, coincidences punctuate the progress of the story. The lighting is often foregrounded as a code; the musical score is commentative and operatic in tenor. It was difficult to apply the 'high'-'low' distinction to his films, especially those of the 1960s.

Ajantrik (1958), made six years after the *Nagarik* fiasco, belongs to an earlier phase. It is closer to Satyajit Ray's early films – in its visual comedy, the lyricism of its images, the neo-realist traits common to both. The film has an order that Ritwik deliberately shattered in his later work. Perhaps for that reason, it succeeded with the public and the critics.

Ritwik's general preoccupations appear already as undercurrents in *Ajantrik*. It is the story of a man who embraces a machine, his derelict taxicab, as a fellow-being, but cannot accept the machine's own logic of outmoding itself. As a critic has pointed out, it depicts the specific trauma of a society in transition, which perceives technology as a means to compensate for its lost meanings. Set in the Chhotanagpur tribal area, the film abounds with shots of the

Satyajit Ray

The world knows of Satyajit Ray as a film-maker, but to Calcutta and Bengal he is much more: an arbiter of culture and an institution in his life-time through a range of other achievements, each of which would have made the reputation of a lesser man. Trained as an artist, his first significant area of work was as book designer and illustrator. The legendary D.K. Gupta of Signet Press found in him a fit artist to meet his exacting standards of book production. Today Satyajit chiefly illustrates his own books.

These books are almost as celebrated among Bengalis as his films, though they are conceived in a lighter vein. Many indeed are ostensibly for children, especially the two series featuring Pheluda the detective and Professor Shanku the scientist. But considered as literature, his finest writings are perhaps his exquisitely subtle and imaginative short stories about other characters and incidents. Many of Satyajit's stories have been translated, some of them by his own hand. He also translates out of English into Bengali – particularly nonsense verse, which may be considered his birthright through his father, Sukumar Ray.

His love and understanding of music is the subject of a film by Utpalendu Chakrabarti. This expertise finds practical expression in the music of Satyajit's own films – composed by himself in all but a few early cases. And he has himself talked of 'Music I Live By'.

Besides these tangible achievements, he counts in Calcutta as a presence. He has lived out his life in the city and drawn his sustenance from it for his work. He has pronounced sparingly, and therefore effectively, on important social and political issues; his support lends the final cachet to any cause. At the same time, he has vindicated Calcutta's milieu to the world. The honours showered upon him by all nations reached their highest point in 1988, when the President of France made an unprecedented trip to invest him with the Legion of Honour.



46.4 Satyajit Ray



From the top
46.5 Param-
bhattarak Lahiri in
Bari Thekey Paliye

46.6 Supriya
Choudhuri in Meghey
Dhaka Tara

46.7 Madhabi
Mukherji in
Subarnarekha



car composed as extensions of the rocky landscape. The sadness of the film springs partly from such identifications, since nature itself, as in all Ritwik's films, finally refuses to accept imposed identifications. It refuses to be pathetic: in the end, it is distant, and lures us to think beyond the confines of the individual. The film's weakest moment is perhaps its conclusion: a child playing with a piece of the destroyed car, evoking a more conventional laughter and hope.

Satyajit's realism, the cinema of details he envisaged, was essentially a metonymic discourse, based on the contiguity of image and life. Ritwik tried to explore the symbolic and metaphoric dimensions of the image and the narrative. When Satyajit argues against the misinterpretation of *Charulata* ('Charulata Prasangey' in *Bishay Chalachchitra*), he tries to explain the logic of metonymy – how meanings can be woven into the narrative through suggestion, inversion and compression – to an audience burdened with literary sensibility. Ritwik complains in his writings ('Chalachchitra Chinta', 'Manab Samaj, Amader Aitihya,

Chhabi Kara o Amar Prachesta') that his audience was not ready to read his films at the metaphoric or symbolic level. The hero in *Ajantrik*, he says, is motivated by an archetypal impulse whose variations we can still find in the child, the primitive man and the madman. The controversy over a long tribal dance sequence baffled Ritwik because he saw the sequence as a pause, a caesura in the structure where the whole story of life, death and resurrection is told in a symbolic pageant. The contemporary audience found the sequence too long, disturbing the formal balance. But such balance was not important to Ritwik: we cannot read his films as we might a classical novel, in terms of character-identification and strict causality.

In *Bari Thekey Paliye* (1959) the relative formal coherence of *Ajantrik* already gives way to an episodic, fragmentary pattern. But it was not until the trilogy of *Meghey Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1962) that Ritwik took the decisive step towards what he calls the epic form.

In *Meghey Dhaka Tara* he draws upon almost all the elements of a run-of-the-mill melodrama. The family in the story has a good and a bad sister, a selfish brother and a saintly one whose dream of becoming a singer finally comes true, a protagonist whose sacrifice helps to resolve the crisis, etc. But Ritwik explodes the formula from within, exploiting the contradictions between the operatic grandeur of the style and the humbleness of the story, as well as the tragic possibility of the narrative.

The film's mythopoeia is simple and can be understood without reference to Ritwik's quotations from Jung and Joseph Campbell. He does not draw upon mythology as essence; but his exploration of the interface of tradition and contemporary reality makes him borrow elements from the lived life of myths. The old custom of *Gauridan*, marrying off daughters at a very early age, has given rise to a whole body of folk songs and poetry on the theme of separation and the nostalgia of the girl for her parental home. The belief in the goddess Durga's return to her mountain home at the time of the Durga Puja is often wedded to that sentiment. Nita, the central character of *Meghey Dhaka Tara*, was born on the day of Jagaddhatri Puja (Jagaddhatri being another manifestation of Durga). Her life becomes an archetypal articulation of the myth: her life-long yearning for the mountains is realized only with her

death, as her last cry 'I wanted to live, I want to live' echoes through a long pan on the mountains. The individual becomes a site for the overlap of history, nature and memory.

Ritwik allegorized the forces of social disintegration, the legacy of war, famine, Partition and riots, because the theme of reunion could only be brought out through allegory and because he read the history of his society as a more general allegory as well. The epic cinema demanded that life be seen as a narrative, not only a source of narrative. When people complained about the coincidences in *Subarnarekha*, Ritwik replied that the film was *about* coincidences. The soundtrack of his films acts like the chorus of a tragedy, commenting on the action, reacting to the action, suggesting a grand scheme behind the little shifts of particular events. In so far as his method of informing every movement with a suggestion of this fuller vision points beyond realism, one can find some connections between these films and earlier narrative traditions in Bengali cinema. In *Bidyapati* (1938) by Debaki Basu, for example, it is not the poet Bidyapati or his love that is central to the film; it is his poetry itself.

In terms of iconography also, Ritwik sometimes resorted to back-lit, softly-focussed portraits. He uses lighting and composition to bring out the very essence of a shot. This style can be traced to early romantic traditions of image-construction. Ritwik embraced the full romanticism of the image but placed it in the context of a ravaged life fighting for every gasp of breath. In *Meghey Dhaka Tara*, Nita and her brother Shankar sing a Rabindrasangeet. Nita's face is composed in rhythmic fragments, bathed in moonlight, thrown up in ecstasy; their song, hurled at the mat walls of the cramped room, attains the quality of a cry.

In Ritwik's mythology the Partition of Bengal becomes the source of all negation. In *Komal Gandhar* he relates this to the disintegration of a theatre group (modelled on the IPTA) and the conflict within the heroine about her love, creating a triangular schema. In *Subarnarekha* the family comes back, but now there is greater emphasis on the historical movement, on evil, on eros and nature. In these films Ritwik asserts the right to negate the negation. All ideas of re-union – with a lover, with parents, with the community, with nature – are predicated with this design.

Yet there is a sense of cosmic evil in

Subarnarekha, conveyed all the more strongly because of the film's visual beauty. Evil attacks the very core of primordial human relationships, as incest becomes for the first time a conscious theme in an Indian film. Another part of the evil is surely the tragic oblivion of history. In a scene of nightlong revelry in the city, there is a monologue by Bijan Bhattacharya against the tracking shot of street-lights: 'They haven't seen the War, the killings, the famine...' In a way, Ritwik's films constitute a sustained tirade against this collective amnesia, an attempt at perpetuating memories.

Mrinal Sen made his first important film, *Baishey Shraban*, in 1960. It dealt with a couple in a Bengal village whose lives were brought to catastrophe by the Great Bengal Famine. Also in 1960, Rajen Tarafdar (1917-87) made his masterpiece *Ganga*, which captured the life of a fishing community with deep intimacy and perception. Both films were products of the new realism in cinema. Mrinal Sen later moved decisively away from this school. Rajen Tarafdar somehow did not live up to the promise of *Ganga*. After three more films, he came back for once with some vigour in *Palanka* (1975).

Meanwhile Satyajit Ray was experimenting with various genres. The films of the 1960s

46.8 Bijan
Bhattacharya and Abhi
Bhattacharya in
Subarnarekha





46.9 Rabi Ghosh and Tapen Chatterji in *Gupi Gyne Bagha Byne*

show Satyajit's range and versatility. *Kanchanjanga* (1962) was the first film for which he composed his own story, and also his first in colour. With *Charulata*, it is the most delicately structured of all his films. Set in the Darjeeling hills, the narrative moves simultaneously along different routes with different sets of characters. The topography of the place becomes a geometric counterpart to the web of the story. Like *Charulata*, *Kanchanjanga* explores the overlapping areas of colonialism and patriarchy; but the class analysis is sharper in *Kanchanjanga*. The broken narrative induces a discursive vision whose impact is most brilliantly seen in the delineation of the two women characters, mother and daughter. The film is largely about these women entering into a discourse dominated by patriarchy. From silence they progress to active speech through a disturbance of the film's dominant mode of perception. As this is enacted, the mist, the echoes, the sound of bells, the lowering frame of mountains – all undergo a subtle re-orientation. Colour was used with consummate mastery in the film. Satyajit and his brilliant cinematographer Subrata Mitra arrived at a colour-scheme that spoke independently of the objects. For various reasons, *Kanchanjanga* provokes comparison with the films Antonioni was making around the same time. But whereas in Antonioni man finally vanishes into space, in Satyajit's work the space itself is charged with empathy.

Though *Kanchanjanga* was too much of an experiment to be a commercial success, Satyajit's films made good at the box-office on the

whole. He was the single most important force throughout the 1960s in creating an audience for the alternative cinema. His success is the more admirable in that it did not keep him from exploring new themes and methods.

Between them, *Kanchanjanga*, *Charulata* and *Gupi Gyne Bagha Byne* (1968) give the best idea of Satyajit's range. In *Charulata* he came out with a seamless classicist film evincing total rapport between feeling and form, a hierarchy of significances brought out through controlled movements and pauses, and a living, sentient decor. In *Gupi Gyne* Satyajit worked with a fable or fairy-tale. One of the greatest films we have ever had, it is a celebration of the cinema, exploiting all its liberties, turning its magic upon itself. *Gupi Gyne*'s songs have become lasting treasure for children. Satyajit's love for Bengal, its language and life, comes out touchingly through the fantastic inversions of the film. The fairy-tale about the adventures of two country bumpkins is rooted in the humble and unspectacular life of rural Bengal, so that the splendour of the kings and palaces has a warmly humorous folk-appeal. The caricaturist in Satyajit found full scope for its genius in the characterization and *mise-en-scène*: among other things, we may be amused to find a caricature of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*.

The 1960s saw the rise of a new phenomenon in Bengali films: the cinema as star-vehicle. Though the dominant cycle of melodramas around this time is usually called the Suchitra-Uttam cycle, it was Uttam Kumar (Arun Kumar Chatterji, 1926–80) who really survived as a superstar for two and a half decades. Many of the great Uttam-Suchitra starrers were made in the 1950s (*Shapmochan*, 1955; *Sagarika*, 1956; *Shilpi*, 1956; *Chawa Pawa*, 1959). In the 1960s, Uttam Kumar appeared as often with Supriya Choudhuri, Sabitri Chatterji, Anubha Gupta or Madhabi Mukherji. In the 1970s the legendary duo finally broke up with Suchitra Sen taking early retirement.

There came to be a period when Uttam Kumar was the sole support of a derelict industry. Novels were written for him, scripts were tailor-made for him, camera-angles were developed to throw his figure into the most favourable relief. All this inevitably cramped his enormous potential as an actor. (One needs to see just one performance by him, in Satyajit Ray's *Nayak* in 1966, to see what talents he truly had.) But it was a delight to see him in his

early films, clad in Bangla shirt and dhoti, exuding not only charm but a singular dignity. Through films like *Saptapadi* (1961), *Deya Neya* (1963), *Lal Pathar* (1964), *Jiban Mrityu* (1967), and *Kalankita Nayak* (1970), Uttam Kumar became the archetypal Bengali bourgeois hero. He absorbed elements of method acting and shaped them into a highly original style.

Suchitra Sen, on the other hand, was all presence. Technically not very secure as an actress, she did a great deal to break the image of the docile, affected, bashful woman projected by Sandhyarani, Sumitra Debi or Arundhati Debi. It was a case of what Molly Haskell calls the star-versus-stereotype dialectic in the classic Hollywood heroines. Something of the same kind was being done to the woman's image in Hindi films by Waheeda Rehman and Meena Kumari around the same time.

Pre-marital love was becoming a lively issue in urban life. The Uttam-Suchitra duo fashioned its articulations quite penetratingly. Looking at these films today, we see how at moments, just because the love they depicted was so self-contained, delusive and irresponsible, it took on an aura of independence and posed certain questions about the family and society which were not easily resolved. It was the glorious day of the black-and-white image, the poetry of grey interiors, affective lighting and vignette close-ups. Capable directors like Asit Sen, Sushil Majumdar (1906-88), Tapan Sinha (1924-), Ajay Kar (1913-85), Hiren Nag and Prabhat Mukherji were in the business. Besides the great veteran actors like Pahari Sanyal (1906-74), Jahar Ganguli (1903-69), Chhabi Biswas (1900-62) and Dhiraj Bhat-tacharya (1905-59), the industry had a brilliant set of comedians: Jahar Ray (1919-77), Nripati Chatterji, Bhanu Banerji (1920-83), and later Rabi Ghosh, Anup Kumar and Santosh Datta (1925-88). Music directors like Kalipada Sen, Nachiketa Ghosh (1924-76), Sudhin Dasgupta (1930-82) and Hemanta Mukherji (1920-89) produced some truly memorable work. Hemanta's voice has become an inseparable part of the romanticism of the ear.

The 1960s was a glorious decade in world cinema, comparable in its fertility only to the 1920s. In Europe, a new cinema was being born; in the Third World too, there were waves of national cinema. In general, this made for a self-awareness for cinema, among other things. Cinema became more conscious of its social existence and of its own history as an art-form. Access to these films came through the film society movement, which had entered its second phase around 1956, though the real surge came in the 1970s. (Today there are 54 film societies in West Bengal). Seminars, exhibitions and publications accompanied the screenings. Like the London, Paris or Amsterdam film societies in the 1920s and 1930s, the Calcutta societies served as a forum to promote and encourage the alternative cinema.

It is against this climate of internationalism that we should see the films of Mrinal Sen, who belongs to the first generation of the new film-makers but in a way provides a bridge with the second phase. In painting too, a second wave was rising in the 1960s after the first one brought into being by the Calcutta Group in the 1940s. In literature again, re-alignments were taking place against the first modernist phase of the 1930s: now we had the *Krittibas* and 'Hungry Generation' poets in one direction and the leftist little-magazine movement on the other. Common to all these shifts was a new



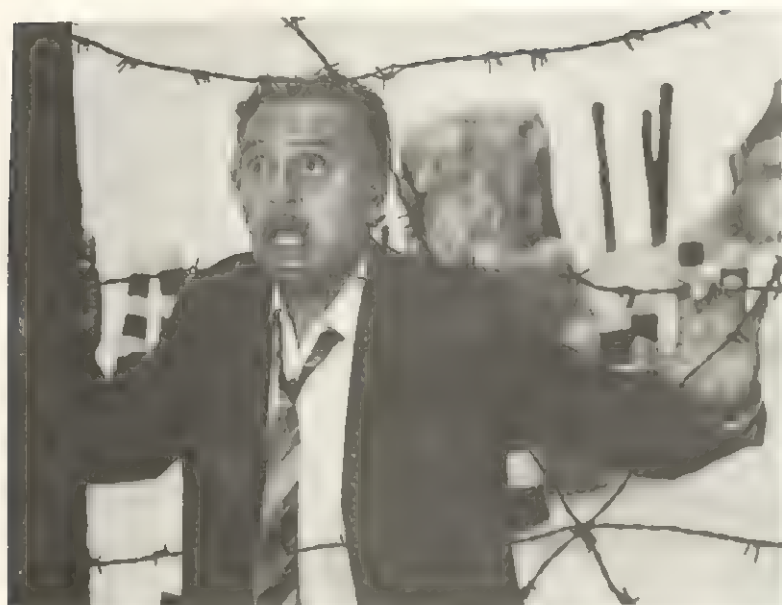
From the top

46.10 Pahari Sanyal

46.11 Bhanu Banerji

46.12 Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar in *Shilpi*





46.13 Utpal Datta in
Chorus

consciousness of urban existence. In the films of Astruc, Rivette, Truffaut and Godard, or those of Wajda and Anderson, the city and its youth were portrayed with an existential mixture of apathy and self-pity. Radicalism was mixed with the sense of contingency in this new nostalgia about the present.

After a tentative handling of middle-class urban reality in *Pratinidhi* (1964) and *Akash Kusum* (1965) and lyrical treatment of the countryside in *Matir Manisha* (in Oriya, 1966), Mrinal Sen made *Bhuban Som* in Hindi in 1969 with help from the Film Finance Corporation (later named the National Film Development Corporation). The success of the film immensely encouraged young film-makers attempting alternative, low-cost film-making. The flavour and charm of *Bhuban Som* springs to a great degree from its spirit of improvisation and playfulness. It exudes an excitement about the very act of filming. The sprightly, light-footed movement of the film does not detract from its deeply sensitive observation of life.

The fragmentation of narrative was mostly decorative in *Bhuban Som*; it became central to the films that followed. The inspiration came from the French *nouvelle vague*, from Godard above all. Godard fragmented his form to reflect the fragmentary nature of urban industrial existence, to include various levels of discourse in the film. Freed from the burden of narrative logic, what Alexandre Astruc called the 'camera-pen' could now play freely with

language. One could write essays with the camera – on life, on stories, on the struggle between signs and things.

If Godard was looking for the politics of reality, Mrinal Sen used the film essay to explore political reality itself. The logic of the early realist films no longer sufficed to frame this reality. The dismantling of that realism became a necessary act of violence. Mrinal's quartet of political films starting with *Interview* (1970), Satyajit's *Pratidwandi* (1970) and Ritwik's *Jukti Takko ar Gappo* (1974) coped with the crisis in various ways.

But to understand that, we must look at the violent tenor of life behind the films. It was the time after the hunger marches of 1966 and the victory of the United Front in the 1967 elections in West Bengal. The legacy of nationalism and Independence was facing a final crisis. It was a time of disenchantment and failing faith. 1967 itself saw a third trend in politics, a new leftism emerging in the campuses and becoming one with the peasant struggle in Naxalbari and Srikakulam. All over the world, indeed, it was the hour of the students and of youth, fighting against liberal as well as conservative establishments including orthodox communism. The concept of a 'third stream' was in the air, in politics and in culture. Before being dispersed and repressed, the youth had time to prove afresh the necessity and validity of protest, of non-acceptance.

Mrinal Sen's films of this period – *Interview*, *Calcutta '71* (1972), *Padatik* (1973) and *Chorus* (1974) – were in one sense documentaries on the city itself. The individual hero became less important: the protagonist was Calcutta. The unemployed hero of *Interview* became a political activist in *Calcutta '71*, where Mrinal filmed his history through a series of stories from four decades of Bengali literature. Despite all these connecting threads, the hero remains an outsider, a riddle that nobody can answer but only destroy. By *Padatik* it was already time for introspection, for raising moral and ethical questions regarding radicalism, for probing afresh the easy inversions to which revolution could take resort. Once the dream was defeated, revolution became a fantasy in *Chorus* – fantasy that registered as a protest.

As arguments, the films were uneven and formally not always convincing. But the formal experimentation was not as important as the ardour and engagement they eviaced. Mrinal

brought cinema directly into the political debate. By its spirit of pamphleteering, his work freed film-going to some extent of its ritual aura. It generated a new excitement about film-making itself.

Satyajit Ray's classicist-humanist sensibility, meanwhile, could no longer cope with the new reality. The poetry of *Aranyer Din-Ratri* (1969) comes largely from a melancholy juxtaposition of the decadence of youth against the beauty of nature. In *Pratidwandi* and *Jana Aranya* Satyajit focusses on individual representatives of the urban middle class brought face to face with reality. The hero becomes insubstantial; the force of events intractable, almost mysterious. *Jana Aranya* validates such a stance by its ingrained bitterness; but in *Pratidwandi* the elliptic language remains an aberration, the silences are not filled by intervention. Satyajit had never felt comfortable with topical reality; but now when he went back to the past, in *Ashani Sanket* (1973), *Shatranj ke Khilari* (in Hindi, 1977) or *Gharey Bairey* (1984), his humanist vision seemed to suppress contradictions and did not yield the wholeness of perception of *Charulata*, for example.

Ritwik Ghatak, interestingly, found in the new politics an occasion to make an autobiography. He tried to put his long acquaintance with Brecht into practice in *Jukti, Takko ar Gappo*. His concern with the grand design of man and history remains; but now the twin themes of the Naxalite movement and the Bangladesh War are superimposed on his own life-story. He develops a language of narrative and argument with considerable brilliance in what is otherwise, technically, rather a slipshod effort.

The mainstream cinema also showed a new concern for the city and its youth. Tapan Sinha, a veteran of the 1950s, became increasingly mature in the 1970s and 1980s. It was his *Apan Jan* (1968) that started a genre projecting the anti-social 'outsider' hero. After the dubious politics of *Sagina Mahato* (1970), Sinha came back to this theme with films like *Raja* (1975). *Raja* is memorable for its cruelty, its unsentimental treatment of a group of anti-socials who are killed off like street dogs, one after another. Parthapratim Choudhuri attracted some critical attention with his *Chhayasurjya* (1964). In *Jadubangsha* (1974) he toyed with broken narrative in a story of a group of semi-lumpens in a small town. The utter



46.14 Arati Bhattacharya and Chhaya Debi in Tapan Sinha's *Harmonium*

pointlessness of their existence, the subterranean violence in their lives, the grotesque defeat of all their actions were treated with a genuine sense of pain and irony – but only at occasional moments. Purnendu Pattrea's *Chhenra Tamsuk* (1974), made after the success of his *Streer Patra* (1973), was of the same genre.

If anybody tried to make films on the model of *Pather Panchali* in the 1970s, it was Tarun Majumdar. Otherwise a master story-teller, he does not seem able to overcome a fixation with the idyllic countryside. In *Nimantran* (1971), *Phuleshwari* (1974), *Dadar Kirti* (1982), *Khelar Putul* (1986), *Parashmani* (1988) or *Agantuk* (1989) he goes on telling the story of good and bad people in simple Bengal villages. *Sangsar Simantey* (1975), however, portrays the life in a prostitutes' quarter of Calcutta with amazing depth and sensitivity. *Ganadebata* (1979) also shows his command over the art of story-telling. Yet it is unfortunate that while Tapan Sinha has moved more and more towards serious films, this other major talent in mainstream cinema has finally opted for a position of compromise.

The 1970s was a period of deep crisis for Calcutta filmiland in Tollyganj. At one point the whole establishment seemed on the point of collapse. The studios closed down one after another; production reached a record low. Technicians literally starved. The stars went over to *jatra* companies, which enjoyed a remarkable revival at this time.

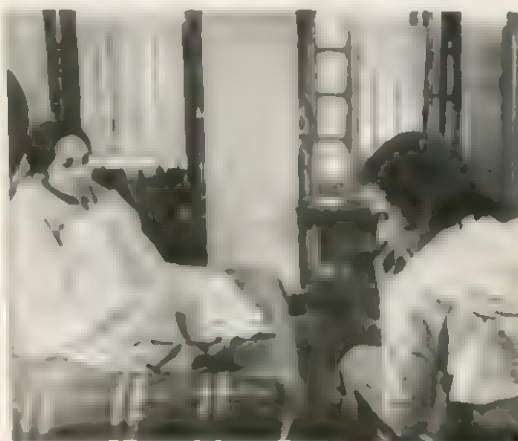
Besides the general economic crisis, the



From the top
46 15 A scene from
Antarjali Jatra

46 16 Shahana Azmi
and Nasiruddin Shah in
Par

46 17 Mamata
Shankar and Pradip
Mukherji in Duratwa



especially chaotic state of the Bengali film industry was responsible for this collapse. Although the film industry provides substantial revenue, nowhere has the Government given it the status of an industry. Hence the deeply insecure condition of regional film production in India. The Patil Enquiry Committee in 1951 and the Working Group on National Policy in 1984 recommended proper organization – without avail. The scarcity of theatres is the greatest problem, making the exhibitor-distributor nexus virtually impossible to break.

In the mid-1980s, the stalemate was broken somewhat by two factors: television serial-making, and the resounding success of a series of popular films, mostly by Anjan Choudhuri (*Shatru*, *Bidrohi*, *Lal Golap*, *Guru-Dakshina*, *Chhota Bou* etc.), made between 1984 and 1989. This brand of films attempts to bridge the gap between popular Hindi and Bengali films, dispensing with the last traces of the literary sensibility that had earlier been discernible even in the most mediocre production of Tollyganj.

Throughout this period, however, the two surviving veterans of the new cinema were making films regularly, and international recognition, both of their work and that of newcomers, kept growing. After making some successful entertainment films, Satyajit Ray worked on one of Rabindranath Thakur's novels, *Charey Bairey* (1984) and on a short story by Premchand (*Sadgati*, 1981, in Hindi). After a forced silence owing to ill-health, he has come back with an interior drama *Ganashatru* (1990), based on Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. Mrinal Sen has changed too: after the grotesque comedy of his *Oka Uri Katha* (1977) in Telugu, he has moved towards an intimate, introspective narrative through films like *Ekdin Pratidin* (1979), *Kharij* (1982), *Khandahar* (1983) and *Ekdin Achanak* (1990), the last two in Hindi. He comes back again and again to Calcutta and its middle-class milieu, closing in now on the subtler ethical and moral problems and shifts of relationship.

When the second wave of the new cinema was joined by a group of young directors, Buddhadeb Dasgupta (1944-), Goutam Ghosh (1950-), Utpalendu Chakrabarti (1948-) and (a little later) Aparna Sen (1945-), the period of what Eric Rhode in his *History of the Cinema* calls 'radical compromise' had already begun with us. 'Third stream' culture, like 'third stream' politics, was being

absorbed by the establishment. Politically radical films won national awards. In Bengal, the situation became particularly baffling for the radicals: now that the Left was in power, the urge to protest grew less immediate.

The new film-makers of the 1980s have often made films on political themes: but by and large, there has been a greater engagement with story-telling. The resolution of the story often becomes one with the resolution of political problems. There is a diffuse and more or less uncritical approach to realism in most films of the decade. For example, the Costa-Gavras-inspired political thrillers like Buddhadeb's *Grihajuddha* (1982) and Utpalendu Chakrabarti's *Chokh* (1982) ground the resolution of the plot itself as the major point, rather than the political substance. The conventions of identification, representation, cognition etc. are not questioned but simply adopted. In Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Duratwa*

(1970) there is an attempt at assimilating politics through a concrete personal experience: the loose, interiorized narrative, operating on the levels of both dream and objective experience, works wholly towards that end.

Utpalendu Chakrabarti, like Buddhadeb, has turned to film-making from a writing career. His documentary on political prisoners, *Mukti Chai* (1977) made a great impact. *Mayna Tadanta* (1980), *Chokh* (1983) and *Dehishhu* (1988) acquire an increasingly dramatic slant.

Goutam Ghosh has moved from a similar kind of realism in his *Mabhooni* (in Telugu 1980) and *Dakhal* (1981) to a wider sweep in *Par* (Hindi, 1984) and *Antarjali Jatra* (1988). Goutam operates his own camera and has a remarkable attachment to the basic physical level of reaction and conduct. The most powerful passages in his films relate to the observation of elemental human struggle (as in the crossing of the river in *Par*), with an

Dr. T. N. Dasgupta, Director
of the Calcutta Film Festival
1988

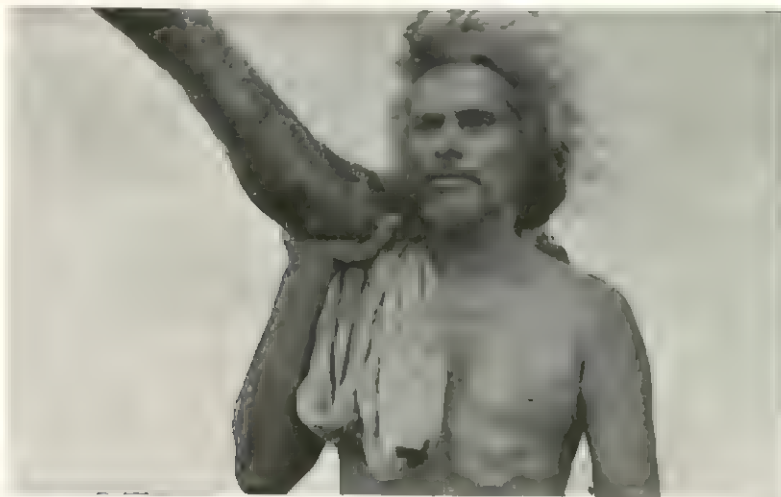




From the top
46.19 A scene from
Dharamtalla ki Mela

46.20 Basudev Rao in
Oka Uri Katha

46.21 Smita Patil in
Mrinal Sen's
Akaler Sandhaney



emphasis on the human body in trauma. One would like to see him explore the full possibilities of this concern.

Aparna Sen made an impression with her very first film *36 Chowringhee Lane* (in English, 1981), where she proved herself to be a competent story-teller. An eye for detail, a feeling for the right kind of gesture and words, and perceptive characterization – all these made the film an absorbing experience. *Parama* (1983) was perhaps the most controversial film of the decade. The piquancy of its subject (extra-marital relations) apart, the film struck every-

one by its boldness and vigour. However, Aparna largely ignored the class-perspective of sexual politics. She also largely sidestepped the problem of projecting women on the screen, of recognizing how conventional dramaturgy and image-construction can address the spectator through a sexist ideology.

Most of these new film-makers have been making documentaries as well. The most important are surely Barin Saha's *Bhasha* and *Chenchu*, Goutam Ghosh's *Hungry Autumn* and Utpalendu Chakrabarti's *Mukti Chai*. Sadly, non-fictional cinema has never been taken up seriously by our film-makers. Documentarists like Harisadhan Dasgupta and Shanti P. Choudhuri have pursued the form with lifelong devotion; but unlike in other countries, there has been no non-fiction movement in Indian cinema. In the 1980s, some exciting work has been done by film-makers like Shashi Anand, Manash Bhounmik, Ranjan Palit, Basudha Joshi, and a group called 'Shape'. Shape's *Dharamtalla ki Mela* (1983) is one of the best non-fictional films ever made in this part of the country.

Television, a force that is already shaping film practice in India, opens up a whole new set of questions around non-fictional cinema, or rather the relation between fiction and non-fiction. Television has given a new urgency and

popularity to non-fiction – in fact, non-fiction is its form. As television becomes the new window to the world, as it devours every possible view, it tends to deny the image itself. The cinema, accordingly, must redefine the image, validate it as construction and artifice so that it may survive artistically.

Television is fast replacing reality with a new synthesis; and its non-fictional bias helps it project a voice without a speaker, knowledge without source. This delicious chaos of information hardly permits any hierarchy of meanings and values. As sponsors buy more time, the process is likely to be speeded up. What should be the role of cinema in this crisis?

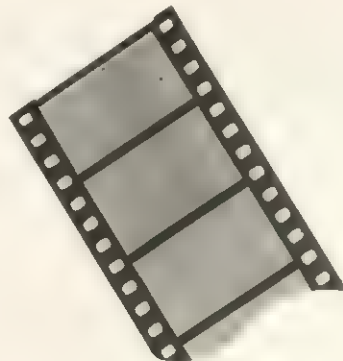
This brings us back to the question of realism with which we set out. Our cinema must reconsider the limits of realism sooner or later. The adoption of television realism even in films has made the task more urgent. Not all film-makers can subscribe to a single school of film-making. But 'alternative cinema' can only survive as a movement, and that calls for a shared area of perception. Here is one possible way of thinking.

After the early realism of our cinema has run its course, is it not time for a re-synthesis, of bridging the gap between 'high' and 'low' art? Can we not use the freedom and fantasy of so-called 'low' cinema to carnivalize the art of the film? This may be the only way to fight the appropriation of folk and popular forces by commercialized art. Middle-road cinema, the commercially viable art, will not achieve this: there the relations between film-maker, mate-



46.22 Nandan, the film auditorium

rial and audience are those of manipulation and exploitation. Instead we require a cinema that is not scared of theatricality and horse-play, of flights of imagination and forays into irrationality, of dream and desire, revolt and madness. Film art cannot be 'high' at the cost of its own atrophy, by losing contact with vital elements in our culture which can be called vulgar only to the extent that they are vulgarized by the commercial machine.





CALCUTTA SOCCER



Moti Nandy

One morning in 1879, ten-year-old Nagendraprasad Sarbadhikari of Hare School was accompanying his mother on her morning trip to bathe in the Ganga. As their carriage crossed the Maidan, they saw some English soldiers kicking a round object about. The curious boy got down to watch. The ball landed near his feet. He picked it up: it was surprisingly light. A soldier called out, 'Kick it to me.' Nagendraprasad complied.

Such is the story of the first encounter of a Bengali with a soccer ball. We should perhaps take it with a grain of salt, for the origins of Calcutta soccer are hard to discover. The game had been brought to India by various groups of Englishmen: civilians, traders, college teachers, military men, and above all the Navy, whose sailors are said to have leapt ashore for a game as soon as their ship touched shore.

The first recorded soccer match in Calcutta was played on the Esplanade in the second week of April 1858 between the Calcutta Club of Civilians and the 'Gentlemen of Barrack-pore'. There had been matches earlier, but these have not been documented. The first serious match was in 1868 between the Etonians and 'the rest' – both teams no doubt drawn from the civilians, the former winning 3-0.

Which was the first soccer club in Calcutta? The Calcutta Football Club was set up in 1872, disbanded in 1876 and revived in 1884, but played rugby alone during this period: it took

up soccer seriously only in 1894. It was a patrician body, confined to public-school men and the 'higher' services and professions. The commercial world had meanwhile set up the Trades Club, which played soccer, in 1878. This was later named the Dalhousie Athletic Club owing to its association with the Dalhousie Institute, which at that time had its well-appointed clubhouse on Dalhousie Square (now Binay-Badal-Dinesh Bag). It was followed by the Naval Volunteers (later the Calcutta Rangers Club) in 1884, and two other European Clubs, Howrah United and the Armenian Club, in the same decade. In 1889 the Dalhousie Club donated the Trades Cup as the trophy for Calcutta's first knock-out tournament.

To trace the history of the Indian clubs, we must go back to young Nagendraprasad (1869-1940). The story does not end with his kicking the football. He interested his schoolfellows in the curious new game. They had a whip-round and went to the only shop that sold footballs, Manton's on Chourangi. What they bought was actually a rugby ball. Crowds gathered to watch them punt it around, and the Headmaster worried about possible injuries. At this point Professor G. A. Stack, seeing the game from Presidency College opposite, took a hand. He bought the boys a soccer ball and set about teaching them the rules and techniques of the game.



It was largely thanks to Stack and his colleague J. H. Gilliland that a group of Bengali youths first grew enamoured of Association Football. It was not long before all Calcutta and Bengal took the game to their own. It is now in the Calcuttans' blood – and sometimes paid for in blood, as on 16 August 1980, at a grim post-centennial of that first game at Hare School, when nineteen spectators died from the pressure of a surging crowd. Frenzy, romanticism and a true delight in the game as art – these constitute the life-blood of Calcutta football in equal proportions.

The first football enthusiasts of the city were its students. The Presidency College Football Club was formed in 1884. The Bengal Engineering College, the Bishop's College, the Medical College, St. Xavier's College and La Martiniere also helped to blaze the trail. It was these students, after they left college, who founded the first of today's open clubs in the 1880s and 1890s to enable them to go on playing the game. Chief among their number were Nagendraprasad himself, Kalicharan Mitra, Manmatha Ganguli and Haridas Sheel.

The first Indian football club, the Wellington Club, was set up in 1884 by none other than Nagendraprasad. It was rent by factions within just one year, and some members left to form the Town Club in 1885. The same year, Nagendra married into the Shobhabazar Raj family, and at once used his new influence to found the Shovabazar Club.

Until its disappearance from even the Second Division League in 1921, the Shovabazar Club paid historic service to Calcutta soccer. It was the only Indian team among the thirteen that played in the first Trades Cup Tournament. Its first fixture against the Xaverians (which it lost 0-3) was also the first occasion that an Indian team took on a European one. The Lieutenant-Governor came to watch out of curiosity. 'The Shovabazar team made a plucky stand,' wrote *The Englishman* on 12 July 1889 – a patronizing but for that very reason significant remark.

This match was significant for a very different reason as well. The three goals constituted a hat-trick – the first ever in any Calcutta tournament – by a student of St. Xavier's, Norman Pritchard. This was the man who won two silver medals in track events (the 200m. run and 200m. hurdles) at the Paris Olympics in 1900 – the first Asian medallist in the Olympic Games, a Calcuttan. Yet his city and his nation

have virtually forgotten his name, to their own dishonour.

1892 was another memorable year for Shovabazar Club, and for soccer in Bengal: the Club scored the first ever victory of an Indian team over a European one – the East Surrey Regiment, in the Trades Cup. The *Indian Field* wrote on 9 October that this triumph had an unprecedented impact in India and even in England: 'it was editorially noticed by the Times and other newspapers of London.'

The Indian Football Association (IFA) was formed in 1893, the Dalhousie Club again playing a major role. The Trades Cup was now diverted to the Junior Tournament, and the IFA Shield became – as it still is – India's most prestigious soccer trophy. The tournament was a very exclusive one at first: Shovabazar Club was again the only Indian team among the thirteen participating. The other Indian teams had to confine their efforts to the Trades Cup; the first to win it was National Club in 1900. Mohan Bagan (founded in 1889) carried it off three years running from 1906 to 1908: then and then only were they allowed to compete for the IFA Shield.

The first Shield winner was the Royal Irish Regiment, with the Fifth Royal Artillery as runners-up. Shovabazar gave a poor account of themselves, losing 0-3 to the Fifth Artillery in their very first match: 'the Babus went all to pieces,' wrote *The Statesman*. Yet 19,000 spectators – the majority obviously not Englishmen – turned up to watch the sahibs play the Final. The pure love of soccer had already laid hold on the Bengali heart.

But it is hard for us to recapture the fierce

47.2 Mohan Bagan
matchbox label





Above :
47.3 The victorious
Mohan Bagan team of
1911

Below :
47.4 Chuni Goswami

patriotic aspirations that had also struck soil on the soccer field. It added a special dimension to the struggle for Independence and the related programme of discipline and self development. It was almost an endeavour of the spirit: Swami Vivekananda remarked that young men would come nearer to heaven through football than through the Gita. Has any other religious leader anywhere made such a claim for any sport?

Heaven truly seemed to have descended on earth when Mohan Bagan finally won the IFA Shield on 29 July 1911, defeating East Yorkshire 2-1. The scorers were Shibdas Bhaduri and Abhilash Ghosh. The whole of India, Calcutta above all, was gripped by a mass ecstasy that has had no parallel before or since. Even Rabindranath's winning the Nobel Prize two years later had less mass appeal.

Mohan Bagan made their way to the Final by beating the Xaverians 3-0, the Rangers 2-1, the Rifle Brigade 1-0 and the Middlesex Regiment 3-0 (after an earlier goalless draw). Naturally there was a stirring build-up to the Final. *The Empire* speculated: 'another record crowd for India, nay, for this side of Suez, will be put up.' People came from Patna, from Assam, from North Bengal. Two-rupee tickets were sold for fifteen: the start of a flourishing black market in football tickets. By 11 o'clock on the great day, 10,000 spectators had gathered on the ground; the final turnout was estimated at between 80,000 and 1,00,000. Most of them got no view at all: they were kept posted by look-out men on treetops, and by volunteers who flew kites with the club colours

when one side or the other scored a goal. And when the match ended, 'The tremendous noise shook heaven and earth as the frenzied crowd descended on the pitch from all sides,' as the man from Reuter described the scene.

It was a victory for India's self-respect and her nascent nationalism. The people could now dream of hoisting another flag on the Maidan one day, atop Fort William itself. The most heartening aspect was brought out by the Muslim weekly, *The Mussulman*: 'It was a sense of universal joy, which pervaded the feelings of the Hindus, the Mohammedans and the Christians alike. The members of the Muslim Sporting Club were almost mad and rolling on the ground with joyous excitement on the victory of their Hindu brethren.' Even the intellectuals laid their judgment aside: a condolence meeting for the writer Indranath Banerji at the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad had to be postponed.

Ironically, it would be thirty-six years before Mohan Bagan won the Shield again: in 1947, the very year of Independence, now contending with Indian teams. For the rest of the British era, the honour of Indian soccer was upheld chiefly by the Mohammedan Sporting Club. Set up in 1891, the Club won the IFA League the very year it entered the First Division, in 1934. Except for 1939, it went on winning every year till 1941. And with each victory, the communal wedge was driven deeper into Calcutta football if not into Calcutta society. The united rejoicing at Mohan Bagan's victory in 1911 was a thing of the past.

Most of the Mohammedan players of the 1930s came from outside Calcutta. This was the first sustained attempt to import players from other states (though Abdul Hameed of Quetta had played for Mohan Bagan for a few years from 1932). It hurt Calcutta's pride, but paid rich dividends: the Mohammedans acquired a team combination, aggressiveness and killer instinct never seen before in Indian football.

In 1939 Mohammedan Sporting, East Bengal and Kalighat all withdrew from the League, enabling Mohan Bagan to become easy champions – for the first time, in their Golden Jubilee year. The European teams too gradually turned from the football field to the field of battle. But it was during this turmoil, in 1945, that two professional British International players first came to play exhibition matches in Calcutta: they were Tom Curtis and Denis Compton.

After Independence (and the concomitant

Partition of India) Calcutta football saw a new flood-tide with the upsurge of the East Bengal Club. Founded in 1921, it had been runners-up in the League five times before winning it in 1942, and both League and Shield in 1945 (as only the Mohammedans had done before them, in 1936). But the real impetus for the Club came with the arrival of millions of uprooted people from eastern Bengal after the Partition. For these ravaged and embittered masses, the one source of hope, pride and victory lay in the triumphs of the Club named after their abandoned homeland.

In the late 1950s, East Bengal had a forward line probably unmatched in Indian soccer history: Venkatesh, Appa Rao, Dhanraj, Ahmed and Saleh. All five were from South India, none from East Bengal; but they gathered proudly under the red and yellow flag, and lakhs of supporters took them to their own. A new intoxicating political current seized Calcutta football as soon as the old nationalistic one had died away. Only since 1980 has it shown signs of abatement, as memories of the Partition and the old homeland itself grew weaker. Meanwhile East Bengal had beaten the Mohammedans' record by winning the League six years in a row from 1970 to 1975.

But what of the tactics and strategies that had obtained these teams their victories over the decades? The first notable development might surprise outsiders. In the 1930s, the Mohammedans first succeeded in persuading Indian players to wear boots. A few coaches like Dukhiram Majumdar of the Aryan Club had made the attempt earlier, but the players perversely continued to play barefoot though fully aware of the disadvantages, specially on a wet field. It was Mohan Bagan's great good fortune that it did not rain on 29 July 1911: of the entire side, only the full-back Sudhir Chatterji wore boots.

Finally S.A. Aziz, the great architect of the Mohammedan team, converted his non-Bengali players to the boot. He did it in stages, letting them play barefoot on dry ground to develop their speed and footwork but making them don boots the moment it rained. This was one of the reasons why their forward line – Nur Muhammad Junior, Rahim, Hafez Rashid, Rahamatullah and Abbas – grew invincible. Others had no option but to adopt the boot: finally in 1953, the All India Football Federation made it compulsory.

The next great technical innovation in Cal-



cutta soccer came in 1955 with the change from the two-back to the three-back system. The four-back system followed in the mid-1960s. Calcutta was waking up to the need to follow international norms and advances. About the same time, League matches were extended from 50 to 70 minutes. Most important, it became compulsory for clubs to have coaches for their teams. The coaches soon came to play a controlling role: the 'Big Three' clubs and their supporters rely heavily on the tactics and strategy thought out by coaches like Amal Datta and P.K. Banerji.

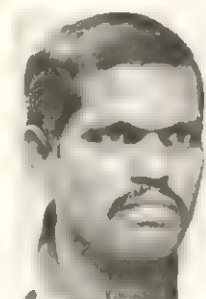
From the mid-thirties to the mid-sixties, a succession of players from other parts of India enriched Calcutta soccer by their skill, intelligence, speed and power. I have already named two crack forward lines. To their names we may add those of Murgesh, Somana, Jumma Khan, Masum, Taj Muhammad, Peter Thangaraj, Telemaren Aao, Ram Bahadur, Kittu, Kempiah, Sattar, Raman, Arumaynaigam, Jarnail Singh, T.A. Rahman, Balaram and others. The last twenty-five years have given us Appalaraju, Nayeemuddin, Habib, Akbar, Shyam Thapa, Xavier Pius and Babu Mani. Some foreign players have also played for Calcutta teams: Pugsli of Burma; Masud Fakri, Musa and Omar of Pakistan; Majid Baskar and Jamshid Nasiri of Iran; Chima Okeri of Nigeria.

To name all the illustrious local players would be a Herculean task. The number would exceed a hundred, and the controversial omissions as many again. Perhaps it would be less

From the top
47.5 Players and
packed stands

47.6 P. K. Banerji

47.7 Balaram





Above :
47.8 The Salt Lake
Stadium

Below :
47.9 Shailen Manna

iniquitous not to attempt the impossible, naming only a few for specific reasons. The victorious Mohan Bagan team of 1911 must be commemorated in full: Hiralal Mukherji; 'Bhuti' Sukul and Sudhir Chatterji (?-1966); Manomohan Mukherji, Rajen Sengupta and Nilmadhab Bhattacharya; Kanu Ray, Habul Sarkar, Abhilash Ghosh (1894-1963), Bijaydas Bhaduri (1883-1936) and Shibdas Bhaduri (1885-1932: Captain). The three footballers to have received the Padma Shree award are all from Calcutta and indeed from Mohan Bagan: Goshtha Pal (1896-1976), Shailen Manna and Chuni Goswami. All the Indian teams to have played in the Olympics proper have also been captained by Calcutta players: T. Aao (1948), Shailen Manna (1952), Samar ('Badru') Banerji (1956) and P.K. Banerji (1960).

The Arjuna Awards for sportsmen were instituted in 1961. Of the sixteen footballers who have so far been honoured in this way, twelve are Calcutta players: P.K. Banerji, T. Balaram, Chuni Goswami, Jarnail Singh, Arun Ghosh, P. Thangaraj, S. Nayeemuddin, Chandreshwar Prasad, Prasun Banerji, Muhammad Habib, Sudhir Karmakar and – the only woman

footballer among the sixteen – Shanti Mallik.

Not that Calcutta has relied on other parties to honour its footballers. There is a statue of Goshtha Pal on the Maidan, and streets have been named after both him and Shibdas Bhaduri. Nowhere else in India, or probably in the world, have football players been so honoured.

The crowning world recognition of Calcutta football came in 1977, when Mohan Bagan invited the Cosmos Club of Brazil to an exhibition match: Pele has thus played in Calcutta. But more radically, the 1970s marked unwelcome developments. In their avidity for trophies, the 'Big Three' clubs let loose a fierce and unhealthy competition to sign up players. Purse-strings were freely loosened: top footballers now receive over a lakh every season. Club loyalties have inevitably lost out to this new allegiance to Mammon. Club officials too indulge in unprecedented bickering and infighting. The football-loving public has grown demoralized and depressed.

There is another reason for this depression. The Nehru International Gold Cup Tournament of 1982 allowed Calcutta spectators to see for the first time how the world's top teams played the game, and how, when all was said and done, the local players lagged behind. Since then the contrast has been driven home, partly by more live fixtures and still more by sports journalism and the telecasting of international matches.

We cannot deny that the glorious world of Calcutta – and Indian – football has tarnished with the years. The set-up needs a radical change. One of the world's finest stadiums, the 1,20,000-seat Yuba Bharati Krirangan, has been built at Bidhan Nagar in the 1980s; but our game has yet to reach international standards.

Calcutta loves football with a blind love. She can sulk and abuse but she cannot abandon the game. She waits to see it restored to its pristine ardour and robust ethics. She should not need to wait for another three hundred years.

(Translated from Bengali)





SPORTS IN CALCUTTA



A Sports Correspondent

Whatever the benefits Job Charnock might have bestowed on Calcutta, there is no evidence that he or his contemporaries introduced any of the major games that have today become India's chief sporting activities. Indeed, these games had scarcely been developed at the time in their country of origin.

Cricket, for instance: it was only in the early eighteenth century, some time after Charnock, that efforts were made in England to standardize the game and draft rules. In India, there are records of informal games since the 1720s, and on 23 February 1792 the *Madras Courier* reported that matches had been played by the 'Calcutta Cricket Club' against Barrackpur and Dumdum. Assuming that the Club in question is the one later known by that name, this gives us 1792 as its latest possible date of foundation, making it the oldest cricket club outside the British Isles.

The first organized match in India of which we have detailed record was played on 18 and 19 January 1804 at Calcutta, between the Old Etonians and the curiously designated 'Calcutta'. Both teams were drawn from the 'writers' of Writers' Building: one is amazed that the staff there included so many Etonians, who indeed won by an innings and 152 runs, thanks to Robert Vansittart, who scored 102 runs and took seven wickets. The pitch was laid on a portion of the green that stretched away south-

wards from Government House – in other words, the Maidan. A large gathering of Indians watched in wonderment.

There is a delightful footnote to the complete scorecard printed in the Calcutta Gazette on 26 January 1804: '2 to 1 against Eton at starting.'

From this humble but romantic beginning, cricket matches began to be played fairly regularly, its devotees moving (somewhat like Thomas Lord himself) from one plot on the Maidan to another. Eventually they were allotted a ground, supposedly on a permanent basis.

However, the ground was bedevilled by one problem after another, culminating in a proposal to drive a road through it. A petition to the Lieutenant-Governor proved infructuous. A saviour appeared in the person of Sir Robert Napier, then Military Member of the Council of India. He suggested that the Club should shift to a ground alongside the road from the High Court to the Calcutta Gate of Fort William.

This seemingly small decision had historic implications. Ever since that time, the Club and, subsequently, the Cricket Association of Bengal have enjoyed the undisturbed use and virtual ownership of the playing area. The land bore no name at the time of the move. Shortly after, it became part of the Auckland Circus Gardens, named after the Governor of Bengal. But an 1854 map by Captain R. Smyth already shows it as the Eden Gardens, after the Misses

From the top
48.1 The Bengal
cricket team which won
the Ranji Trophy in
1990

48.2 Shutey Banerji

48.3 Pankaj Ray

48.4 Arun Lal



Eden, Auckland's sisters; and it is as the Eden Gardens that the ground – the second biggest in the world, with a seating capacity of 85,000 – is known to this day. The stadium has been formally named after the legendary 'Ranji' and the clubhouse after Dr Bidhan Ray.

Meanwhile the Ballygunge Cricket Club had been set up in south Calcutta in 1864. It merged with the Calcutta Cricket Club (CCC) in 1950, but the grounds remain.

Many famous cricketers have appeared at Eden Gardens down the years, beginning with Jack Hobbs and Herbert Sutcliffe some fifty years ago. The CCC had invited the first English visiting team, led by G.F. Vernon, even earlier, in 1888-9, followed by the 'Oxford University Authentics'. Arthur Gilligan's team came out to India in 1926-7 as the first official MCC tour, largely owing to the good offices of Reggie Lagden, the historic President of the CCC.

Gilligan's tour paved the way for India's entry into international cricket. Gilligan gave a favourable report on the state of Indian cricket to the authorities at Lord's. This helped India to win membership of the Imperial Cricket Conference in 1929. The Board of Control for Cricket in India had been formed the previous year, as also – by the endeavours of the CCC – the Cricket Association of Bengal and Assam.

The CCC always had one or two first-class players in their ranks. Among Englishmen between the Wars, the most outstanding were Reggie Lagden and Ian Campbell of Surrey, Alec Hosie of Hampshire and, perhaps the finest, Tom Longfield of Kent, a brilliant all-rounder who led Bengal to a remarkable victory – their only one till 1990 – against Southern Punjab in the Ranji Trophy final at Eden Gardens in the 1938-9 season.

Needless to say, the game had naturalized itself among Indians long before this time. Saradaranjan Ray (1858-1925), mathematician and Sanskrit scholar, is also generally held to be the progenitor of cricket among Bengalis. As Principal of Vidyasagar College, he fielded a 'Bengalee Schools' side against the 'British Schools' in 1913. The match became a regular fixture, with the Anglo-Indian Schools joining a few years later to provide triangular competition.

From this time, the 'local' clubs made steady progress, and grew ready to take over from the sahibs. Foremost among these clubs were the Sporting Union, the Town Club and the Aryans. The first was inspired by the Ray family, closely followed by the Basu brothers, Kartik (1906-84) and Ganesh, all fiercely addicted to the game. Some time later the Kalighat Club also began to field doughty



teams, and it was mainly from these three clubs that the Bengal teams, now composed exclusively of Indians, were drawn.

Sadly, however, Calcutta and Bengal have produced few Test players. Wisden lists about a dozen; but most of them made a single or at most a handful of appearances. Sharadindu ('Shute') Banerji (1911-80) of the Aryan Club Calcutta has produced; but he took up a job in Jamshedpur and thenceforth turned out mainly for Bihar. Pankaj Ray (1928-), however, played 43 Tests, opening India's innings for years. Prabir Sen (1926-70) also played in fourteen Tests. More recently, Dilip Doshi and Arun Lal have been two Test cricketers associated with the city.

Despite this paucity of Test players, cricket has today seized Calcutta – like the rest of India – with an apparently incurable fever. The infection lasts throughout the winter months and even into the summer, with endless matches and tournaments from the State level to humble schoolboy fixtures, not to mention street games with a pile of bricks in place of stumps. But finally the last wicket falls, and hockey moves in for what has sadly become a very short season.

Hockey is a sport that used to be regarded as India's own; but with the decline of the national

side, interest has inevitably dwindled. The golden era of Indian hockey was the 1930s. The country was still undivided, and the national teams were drawn mainly from Bombay, Punjab and Calcutta, though those two supreme masters, Dhyan Chand and his brother Roop Singh, came from Jhansi.

The first Indian hockey clubs were formed in Calcutta in 1885, and the Beighton Cup Tournament began in Calcutta in 1895. The Bengal Hockey Association was formed in 1905, and the first abortive attempt at an All-India Hockey Federation made in Calcutta in 1907-8 and again in 1920. When the Federation was formed, it held its first National Championships at Calcutta in 1928.

Spearheaded by Anglo-Indians, Calcutta had as high a standard of hockey as the other major centres, both in the Senior League and in the Beighton Cup. The Customs, Port Commissioners and Railways wooed top-class players with jobs; and contending with them were private clubs such as the Rangers, the Xaverians and Mohan Bagan. Allen of the Port team was perhaps the finest goalkeeper of them all; the Tapsell brothers were giants in defence; Dickie Carr and Shaukat Ali were inside forwards who would have graced the Indian team but for the brothers from Jhansi; while Joe Gallibardy in

From the top
48.5 Test match at the
Eden Gardens: India vs
MCC

48.6 Leslie Claudius

48.7 Gurbux Singh





48.8 A hockey match in progress

Facing page
From the top :

48.9 Dilip Basu

48.10 Leander Paes

48.11 Polo on the maidan

the centre line was as resolute in defence as in setting the forward line in motion.

In post-Independence years, Calcutta's outstanding contributions to the national side have been Pat Jansen and G. Glacken, forwards, and Leslie Claudius, right half-back. Claudius played in a record four Olympics and captained the side at Rome in 1960 – when, alas, India relinquished the title to Pakistan. Others whom Calcutta can well call her own, are Keshav Dutt, Gurbux Singh, G.S. Dubey, M. Daluz and C.S. Gurung. Calcutta's Ann Lumsden is the first woman to receive the Arjuna Award for Hockey.

The British gift of cricket was followed some ninety years later in 1872 with the introduction of rugby football. The Maidan was a far more civilized piece of land by that time: a very suitable plot was made available right across from Eden Gardens, and the Calcutta Football Club (CFC) set up its H-shaped posts. Sadly, it was wound up in 1876 for reasons undisclosed. A large amount was lying with the Club's bankers in silver rupees. The Committee and members had these melted down and fashioned into a most handsome trophy which they presented to the Rugby Football Union back 'home'. Ever since, England and Scotland have

contended annually for the Calcutta Cup.

Happily the CFC was brought back to life in 1884, at first for rugby alone but from 1894 for soccer as well. The course of Calcutta soccer has been narrated in a separate article. Rugby did not disappear; but it never became a popular or national game. Two local schools, La Martiniere and the Armenian College, included it in their programmes. The All-India Rugby Football Tournament is still played in alternate years at Calcutta and Bombay, with a handsome trophy presented – in lieu of the Calcutta Cup? – by the Rugby Football Union.

The four major team games take us through the twelve months of the year. But needless to say, many other sports are pursued alongside them and sometimes, as it were, under their aegis. The Bengal Lawn Tennis Championships, for instance, were conducted from 1887 by the Calcutta Cricket Club, the outfield at Eden Gardens being considered good enough to be marked out with courts. By the end of the First World War tennis had attracted a large following, even if primarily as a social pursuit.

The Cricket Club, though still restricting membership to the British upper class, would accept entry to the Tennis Championships from all and sundry. Thus it was that the 1920s were dominated by Japanese players like Zenzo Shimidzu and Okamoto, who had come to work in Calcutta. The first Indian on the tennis roll of honour was N.S. Iyer, the 1922 champion. The next was E.V. Bobb in 1927. But the outstanding personality of this era was Jenny Sandison from the railway colony at Kharagpur, who won the Women's Singles four years running from 1928 to 1931.

Meanwhile, tennis clubs had emerged in the city. The oldest was the North Club at Beadon Square (now Rabindra Kanan); but the South Club followed and soon grew pre-eminent. Founded in 1920 by three ardent lovers of the game, Anadi Mukherji and Akshay and Ganesh Dey, it started off with a single lawn court. But with the zealous support of its Vice-President J.M. Sengupta, nationalist leader and then Mayor of Calcutta, the Club expanded swiftly across Woodburn Park, and soon the Committee could look with pride on six well-tended grass courts. Later there would be twelve, as well as six brick-red hard courts, and the Club was rightly referred to as the Wimbledon of the East. Top players from the world over have come to play here: Henri Cochet and J.

Brugnon of France; 'Bunny' Austin of England; Bill Tilden and Pancho Segura of the USA; Ken Rosewall, Fred Stolle, Lewis Hoad and Roy Emerson of Australia; Manuel Santana of Spain; Ivan Lendl of Czechoslovakia. The Club would send some of these players on to other states for exhibition matches, thus popularizing the game throughout India. Many Davis Cup ties have been played at the South Club, including those against Brazil in 1966 and Australia in 1974 – two years when India reached the Finals. This achievement was repeated, for the third time, in 1987.

In the early 1930s the Club started the Calcutta Lawn Tennis Championships, which grew into the East India Championships. Finally in 1946, the Club had the honour of inaugurating the National Championships. When the first Asian Championships were instituted in 1949, it was almost by right that the Calcutta South Club was asked to hold them; and it seemed only fitting that the Club's own Dilip Basu should carry off the Men's Singles title. After Basu the Club has boasted such names as Sumant Mishra, Naresh Kumar, Akhtar Ali, Jaideep Mukherji, Premjit Lal, and most recently Zeeshan Ali and Enrico Piperno. The centre of Indian tennis has perhaps shifted today; but South Club remains a major source of the game's vitality in the land. Leander Paes, who lifted the Junior Wimbledon title in 1990, is a Calcutta boy.

Calcutta has led India in other games too. The Royal Calcutta Golf Club, founded in 1829, is the oldest institution outside the British Isles, and has moved from Dumdum via the Maidan to Tollyganj. (Here, across the road, the Tollygunge Club offers another excellent course.) The 'Royal' has always controlled Indian golf. From 1892 it conducted the Amateur Golf Championship. Since 1955-6, when the Indian Golf Union was set up, the Championship has been organized in rotation by Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay; but the 'Royal' is recognized as the founding force behind the Union. It also, incidentally, maintains a fine bowling green on the Maidan.

One of Calcutta's most distinguished 'Raj' sports has always been polo. The origins of the game are sometimes traced to Persia; but a more cogent claim is Manipur's, where Captain Joseph Shearer found anything up to twenty villagers to a side playing perched on their diminutive ponies. The English tea planters

of Cachhar picked up the game from their Manipuri labourers and set up the Silchar Polo Club in 1859. Visitors from Calcutta were inspired – above all by Shearer – to knock about the Baliganj Maidan with the few ponies at their disposal. In 1863 Shearer visited Calcutta: this further fired the enthusiasts to set up the Calcutta Polo Club.

The next year Shearer brought down his Manipuri team, the 'Band of Brothers', their ponies transported by country craft with great difficulty. They easily won over the Calcutta side – who forthwith bought the Manipuri ponies at very healthy prices.

Whatever its humble beginnings in Manipur polo has become a sport for the affluent – except for the armed forces, which can equip players (especially with mounts) at hardly any cost to the individual. When the game spread to other parts of India, the leading centres were in the princely states. The need was soon felt for a governing body for the game; and the Calcutta Polo Club was the natural leader in founding the Indian Polo Association in 1892. But it was not until 1907 that the IPA Championship was inaugurated, and the honour of staging it went



48.12 At the race
course



to Calcutta, where the finals continue to be played – traditionally on Christmas Day.

The Tournament was suspended during the two World Wars, though the period in between saw the vintage days of polo in India. The Second World War in particular devastated the grounds. Partition and the ensuing turmoil compounded the problems. But efforts were soon begun to revive the game, and in 1956 it was felt that the ground in the middle of the Race Course had been restored to championship standard. Many stalwarts from among the princes – soon to be ex-princes – began to reappear. The Army, too, happily preserved one horse-borne unit, the 61st Cavalry, when it mechanized the cavalry regiments. The triumphant consequence has been that except for a single year, 1983, the Army team has carried away the Championship without fail from 1963 to the present.

Let us end this section by looking at the other great sport involving the horse: racing. Horses had been raced in England since the first half of the seventeenth century, but the sport did not reach India until the closing years of the eighteenth. When it did, we are told, it began in Calcutta.

The first recorded meet was on 16, 17 and 18 January 1794, accompanied by 'breakfast with music' and a 'Ball and Supper'. There was another meet on 25, 26 and 27 November, with plates of 50 gold mohurs each (1 mohur = 17 rupees). The austere Lord Wellesley suspended racing for a few years from 1798; but it revived forcefully in 1803 with the formation of the Bengal Jockey Club, which was entrusted with framing rules and generally putting on a sound

basis the irregular subscription races held till then.

Races were held at Akra near Metiabruz till 1809, when the venue moved to the Maidan. At both places, races were first held in the morning, on a straight course. Gradually the course took shape as we know it today, virtually a triangle with the corners rounded off, but it was not until 1876 that racing in the afternoon became established. A subsidiary course was set up at Tollyganj; another, not very successfully, at Barrackpur, to be sold off in 1954 after only 71 days' racing in thirty years.

The authority of the Jockey Club was consolidated by the founding of the Calcutta Turf Club in 1847. Within the next forty years or so, the Turf Club came to control every course from Peshawar to Mysore other than Bombay, Pune and Karachi. It became the 'Royal Calcutta Turf Club' when George V visited the city after the Delhi Durbar of 1911. Today the conduct of the sport has been divided between five Turf Authorities in the country; but they usually operate by a happy consensus.

Up to the Second World War, the men in the saddle were mainly from Australia and England, with the occasional Irishman. Among the regular visitors were Jack Goswell, Wally Sibbritt, Ted Fordyce and Eddie Cracknell. But needless to say, racing was progressively Indianized, as regards breeding, training and riding.

The first Indian jockey to win the Calcutta Gold Cup was Kheem Singh in 1950. After him came Noel Remedios in 1959. When he repeated his triumph in 1962 and again in 1963, there could be no doubt that Indian racing had come of age.

Moti Nandy

II

In 1900, Norman Pritchard of Calcutta won two silver medals at the Paris Olympics, in the 200 metres run and the 200 metres hurdles. The six points won thereby ensured India fourth place in athletics, jointly with Hungary, in those easy times. Twenty years later P.C. Banerji of Calcutta was one of the four Indian athletes at the Antwerp Olympics of 1920. At Paris in 1924, three of the six Indian athletes were from the city: Pitt, Hall and Hildreth.

These, however, were unofficial entries. In 1927, an All-India Athletic Meet was held in Calcutta, and it was there that the Indian Olympic Association was formed. Henceforth India became an official entrant to the Olympic Games. Two Calcutta athletes, Hall and Burns, went to the 1928 Games at Amsterdam, and another two, Sutton and Vernieux, to the 1932 Games at Los Angeles.

I should record here the admirable role of the Indian Football Association in ensuring India's participation in the Olympics before Independence and for some time after. The IFA has long had a tradition of organizing charity matches. Many of these in former times went to finance the Olympic teams: without such help, India could not have fielded sides in hockey, football and athletics in those early days.

Indian women took part in the Olympics for the first time at Helsinki in 1952. Of the four who went, two were from Calcutta: Nilima Ghosh for athletics and Arati Saha for swimming. It was Arati again who in 1959 became the first Asian woman to swim the English Channel; and subsequently, the first sports-woman to win the Padma Shri award. She has thus become one of the best-known of Calcutta's unsuspectedly large circle of successful sportswomen, many of whom find mention in this article.

The last Calcutta girl to go to the Olympics was Soma Datta in rifle-shooting at Seoul in 1988: fittingly so, for the first Asian woman to join the World Shooting Championships had also been Gita Ray of Calcutta, at Cairo in 1962. Before her, Sabita Chatterji had held the national title for eight years from 1952 to 1959. Calcutta has been the cradle of rifle-shooting in India, as of so many other sports. The first

All-India Rifle-Shooting Competition took place in the city in 1952, and the National Rifle Association was formed during the meet. The rifle-shooters who represented India at the 1952, 1956 and 1960 Olympics were all from Calcutta; and it was a Calcuttan, Haricharan Shaw, who won India her first international medal in the sport – a bronze, at the 1962 Asian Games at Jakarta.

The All-India Badminton Association was formed in Calcutta in 1934, and the first National Tournament held here the same year. The champion was Vijay Madgavkar, a Maharashtrian settled in Calcutta. The city has produced the world-ranking doubles partnership of Manoj Guha and Gajanan Hemmadi, as well as the National Champions Dipu Ghosh and Ramen Ghosh and the current women's champion Madhumita Singh Bisht (Goswami).

Table-tennis has been, if anything, dearer to Calcutta. The first All-Bengal Ping-Pong Tournament, as it was then designated, took place at the Overtoun Hall in 1911 under the aegis of the local YMCA. The Bengal Table-Tennis Association – the first in the country – was formed in 1934, and the All-India Table-Tennis Federation at the South Club in 1937.

The city has always been the chief upholder of the game in India. It has produced champions like Kalyan Jayant, Indu Puri and Rupa Mukherji, and continues to nurture talent at the Junior and Sub-Junior levels. It played host for the World Table-Tennis Championships in 1975. The 12,000-seat Netaji Indoor Stadium, the first of its kind in India, was built for the occasion in just six months.

Calcutta proves to have led the way in practically every game played in India. Basketball was ushered into the country by the Calcutta YMCA. The Bengal Basketball Association was set up in 1927, twenty-three years before the National Federation, and a separate Association for women came into being in 1928.

The Billiards Association (later Association and Control Council) of India was also formed in Calcutta in 1926, and was chiefly responsible for the high standard of the game in India today. The Amateur World Billiards Cham-

Above :
48.13 Madhumita
Goswami

Below :
48.14 Soma Datta





Above :
48.15 Rabi Ray

Below :
48.16 Gobardhan Babu

pionships were held in 1958 in Calcutta. Wilson Jones of Maharashtra won it: the first Indian to win a World Championship in any sport. Another World Championship Tournament has been held here subsequently, as well as the inaugural World Snooker Championship.

Calcutta has also topped India in bridge. A player like Rabi Ray has become a legend. India's only international victory in bridge so far was achieved by Calcutta's Bhabanipur Card Club at the Far Eastern Championships at Manila in 1976. But even more laudable perhaps was the fourth place obtained among fifty-six nations at the 1988 Venice Bridge Olympiad by the Indian team, half whose members were from Calcutta: Kamal Mukherji, Shantanu Ghosh and Debashis Ray.

But we have moved too much into sedentary games. Returning to the most active and indeed violent end of the spectrum, boxing was introduced in Calcutta by the British Army. The first recorded bout took place in October 1884 at the Parsee Theatre between Smith and Eastwood of Fort William. Among resident Calcuttans, the sport was first fostered by the Anglo-Indian schools. The Armenian College also produced excellent boxers. Bengalis came into the picture around 1924 with the rise of Pareshlal Ray (1898-1979), who first distinguished himself in his schooldays in England and then at Cambridge.

The Bengal Amateur Boxing Federation was set up in 1930; and in May 1948, the All-India Boxing Federation was formed at Calcutta, at a meeting of state representatives gathered there for the Olympic trials. Of the seven boxers that went to London that year, six were from Calcutta: Rabin Bhatta, Binay Basu, Bob Lal, R. Cranston, J. Nuttall and M. Joachim. Binay Basu went again to Helsinki in 1952 with fellow-Calcuttans Shakti Majumdar and Oscar Ward – three out of the Indian team of four. But interest in boxing declined in the city after that, with the exodus of Anglo-Indians and the overwhelming popularity of cricket.

In 1905, when the great Eugene Sandow visited Calcutta, his demonstrations inspired the youth of the city to start training with weights. It was S.N. Majumdar who introduced the first modern disc-loading barbell set in India around 1907-8. An All-India Association was formed in the early 1920s, and national weightlifting championships began. The sport gradually spread through the country.

The Bengal State Association for weightlifting was set up in 1933; and upto the 1960s, the city's weightlifters were a force to reckon with. The Olympics, the Commonwealth Games and other international meets saw such Calcutta stalwarts as Lakshmikanta Das, Arun Das, Nilmani Das, Alok Ghosh, Mohanlal Ghosh, Anil Mandal and Kamalakanta Santra. Mohanlal was the first Indian ever to attempt a world record, at the 1966 Commonwealth Games in Jamaica.

In the 'Bharat Shri' national body-building championships, Calcutta has produced the greatest number of winners since the contest began in 1951. Parimal Ray was the first to win the title of 'Mr Asia', at the First Asian Games held at Delhi in 1951; and soon after, Manotosh Ray and Manohar Aich triumphed in their respective classes in the 'Mr Universe' contest. Aich is still amazing the public with his successful pursuit of body-building and participation in international contests. Here too I must mention the renowned body-builder and yoga expert Bishnucharan Ghosh (1903-70).

All the sports I have treated so far owe their inception to European precept and practice. Wrestling is perhaps the only major sport of indigenous origin to be practised in Calcutta. It is therefore doubly important to recall its golden days, as well as its strong links with patriotic sentiment at the time of the freedom struggle. The revolutionaries of the time advocated wrestling along with other indigenous martial sports like sword-play and dagger-play.

In or about 1892, Maharaja Nripendra-narayan of Koch Behar staged a World Wrestling Championship in Calcutta, where Karim Bux triumphed over Tom Cannon. But the outstanding tradition of wrestling in Calcutta was set up by the Guha family: Ambu Guha (fl. 1857) and his descendants, among them Kshetra (who taught Swami Vivekananda wrestling), Panchanan, and the glory of his clan, Jatindracharan or 'Gobar' Guha (1892-1972). A man of learning and refinement, he popularized amateur wrestling in the city around 1932-3. He went on many international tours, crowned by winning the World Light-Heavyweight title at San Francisco in 1921.

The state Wrestling Federation was formed in 1947. Over the next ten years, Nirmal Basu, Nirranjan Das and Tarakeshwar Pandey of Calcutta went to various Olympiads and Jogeshwar Singh to the Asian Games. In the



Above :
48.17 Body-builders
by the riverside

Below :
48.18 Manohar Aich

1960s, wrestling contests with international participants were held regularly in the city: wrestling became something of a spectator sport. But sadly yet unquestionably, interest in the sport has declined drastically in the last twenty years, and the *akhras* find few new entrants. All the more reason to recall the old glory, and be thankful for the other, at least partly indigenous sport that continues to flourish in Calcutta and Bengal: swimming.

Bengal is a land of rivers, lakes and ponds, and the earliest swimming champions of Calcutta were trained on the Ganga. Popular interest in swimming was first aroused by long-distance swimming contests on the river: for 13, 22, 23 or even 30 miles. This was also the time that Praphulla Ghosh (1900-73) won renown as an endurance swimmer. But he was also a competitive swimmer and, moreover, a celebrated circus artiste.

In former times, competitive swimming in Bengal was confined to Calcutta. The 1920s saw the establishment of swimming clubs at College Square and Hedua (now Azad Hind Bag). Most of the leading swimmers came from the National Swimming Association, the Central Swimming Club, the College Square Swimming Club, and the Boubazar Byayam Samiti. The first-named of these, though a

provincial body, won affiliation to the Federation International de Natation Amateur; and later merged with the Indian Swimming Federation to form the Swimming Federation of India.

The first Olympic swimmer from India was Nalinchandra Malakar of Calcutta, at Los Angeles in 1932. After Independence, most of the Indian swimmers and water-polo players at the 1948 and 1952 Olympics were from the city. Shachin Nag, also of Calcutta, won the first gold medal in the first Asian Games at Delhi in 1951: the first gold medal ever won individually by any Indian in any international sporting competition whatsoever. Hence at the 1982 Asiad, also at Delhi, a street in the Games Village was named after Shachin Nag.

To this day, a good number of India's leading swimmers and nearly all the best water-polo players come from Calcutta. They largely ensured the silver medal for India at the 1970 Asiad and the bronze in 1982. National records have been broken time and again by men like Shachin Nag, Dilip Mitra, Rajaram Shawoo, Praphulla Mallik, Ashis Das and Sanjib Chakrabarti, and women like Arati Saha, Sandhya Chandra, Kalyani Basu, Nafisa Ali and Bula Choudhuri.

In a different direction, the Indians who first





Above :
48.19 Mihir Sen

Below :
48.20 Arati Saha

crossed the English Channel were all Calcuttans, beginning with Mihir Sen, Bimal Chandra and Arati Saha. Mihir Sen (1930-) went on to perform many other feats, finally winning a place in the Guinness Book of Records for his 'unique achievement' in long-distance swimming. And beyond his personal achievement, Sen was the founder and leading spirit behind the Explorers' Club of Calcutta, set up to ensure the continuance of adventure sports among the city's youth.

The urge for adventure has found continuous and widespread expression in another surprising way. Dwellers in a megalopolis on the world's flattest plain, Calcuttans have shown a remarkable fascination for mountaineering. There are three mountaineering training institutes in India; their largest body of alumni – nearly 5,000 – is from West Bengal, the majority from Calcutta. Calcutta has more registered mountaineering clubs than any other Indian city, sending out thirty to thirty-five expeditions annually during two seasons. Another 1,200 young men and women, at the very least, join rock-climbing training programmes every year.

India's first unofficial mountain-climbing expedition set out from Calcutta in 1960: they conquered Nandaghunti. Since then, mountaineers from Calcutta have scaled Kamet, Mana, Trishul, Choukhamba, Nanda Kot and Sudarshan among other peaks.


In 1985, a 1,20,000-seat stadium – the biggest in Asia, and one of the ten biggest in the world

– was opened at Bidhan Nagar. That being the International Year of Youth, it was named the Yuba Bharati Krirangan, the Stadium of the Message of Youth. All major national and international football matches are now held here, as well as prestigious athletic meets, as the football ground is ringed by a Rekotran Track on a synthetic surface.


On 45 acres of land alongside the stadium, the Netaji Subhash National Institute of Sports (NSNIS) has set up its Eastern Regional Complex. Trainees from all over India come here for training as coaches in various games. National Coaching camps are held in various events, and sports grounds and tracks have been laid out for the purpose. A synthetic-surface hockey field is under preparation. The Eden Gardens cricket ground and the Netaji Indoor Stadium have been mentioned already. Supporting these giants is a network of ground and sports facilities spread all over the city. And behind them all is the spirit that has acted as pathfinder to the nation from the earliest days of organized sport in modern India.

Yet up till now, the city has not been entrusted with hosting any major sports meet except the South Asian Federation (SAF) Games in 1987, the Reliance Cup Cricket Final the same year, and the Jawaharlal Nehru Cup Cricket Final in 1989. Calcutta might well harbour a resentment about this. But being a 'sporting city', it seldom puts its sadness into words.

(Translated from Bengali)



DURGA PUJA IN CALCUTTA



Jaya Chaliha and Bunny Gupta

Durga Puja in Bengal, Dusshra and Navaratri in other parts of India, celebrate the universal resurgence of the power of creation over destruction. The story goes that Mahishasur, the Buffalo Demon, ravaged the earth and was invincible. The gods, in dismay, combined their powers to create a beautiful sixteen-year-old maiden, and each placed his or her most potent weapon in one of her ten hands. Her return each year in the Bengali month of Ashwin (September-October) commemorates Rama's invocation of the goddess Durga before he went into battle with Ravana.

The traditional image of the Bengali Durga follows the iconographic injunctions of the Skand Purana. It is similar to the Durga of Aihola and of Mahabalipuram (seventh century). The tableau of Durga with her four children—Kartik, Ganesh, Saraswati and Lakshmi—representing respectively the Protector, the Initiator of the puja, Knowledge and the Provider—signifies the complete manifestation of the goddess. A later iconographic development of this tableau has turned Durga Puja into a family affair.

Preparations begin a month in advance. Processions and posters press the demand for Puja bonus, as the bread-winner has to meet many demands for new clothes and furnishings for the home. Pre-Puja bargain sales and exhibitions introduce the sartorial style for the

coming year. Bengali newspapers and magazines publish voluminous 'numbers' or annuals—the springboard for many a budding author, besides their quantum of works by well-known writers.

Durga Puja is ushered in on Mahalaya, the first phase of the waxing moon in Ashwin. Thousands offer prayers to their ancestors at the city's river ghats. A special pre-dawn programme of readings from the Chanda and Agamani songs welcoming the goddess are relayed by All-India Radio. This traditional programme, conceived by Barendrakrishna Bhadra, has become an institution: a chorus of protests led to its restoration after a change was attempted one year.

The joyous atmosphere builds up as dhakis or drummers from the countryside collect at the stations and at important town centres. They beat their feathered drums to attract the community to the neighbourhood where the goddess is worshipped.

The first festival of Durga Puja in Calcutta has been celebrated by Bhabananda, the ancestor of Mahatma Keshub Chandra Sen, in an elaborate 1606. In Krishnachandra's day, the Puja was a private affair in the ancestral chamber. It was held in the hall of the present building by the ancestor Ramesh Ray. The family Puja of the Sanyal family of Barisal came back to Calcutta in the early 20th century and continued even today in a highly traditional style.



49.1 Durga Puja.
Solwyns

Durga Puja broke free from the pillared cortiles at Guptipara in Hugli District when twelve angry young men were stopped from taking part in a household puja. They formed a twelve-man committee, which held the first public or community Durga Puja by subscription. Hence such pujas came to be called *baroari* (*baro*, twelve; *yar*, friend). A plaque at Bindeshwaritala shrine dates the event in 1168 Saka (1761 AD). But records are scant and the date controversial. The *Friend of India*, the monthly once published from Shrirampur, mentions 1790.

The word *sarbajanin* (for all men) came to be substituted for *baroari* at the time of the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta in 1910. The first community puja in Calcutta was held at Balaram Basu Ghat Road the same year. The celebration was used as a nationalist forum in religious guise. A pledge of solidarity was taken, and the country was identified with the goddess.

The fun and excitement of the old *baroari* puja took a serious turn in the early *sarbajanin*. Fencing with staves (*lathi khela*), yoga and drill displays provided moving demonstrations of a people preparing to fight for freedom.

Swadeshi goods were sold in the stalls around the pandals (the awnings or temporary structures where the pujas are held). After Independence, martial arts of an international flavour have made their entry – jujitsu, karate etc. – but variety shows of song, dance and recitation are more popular. Many types of books, Marxist literature no less than popular fiction and children's fare, are prominently displayed.

Going back to earlier times, Durga Puja became the practice among the compradors, the new urban mercantile aristocracy in Calcutta. The accent changed. Nabakrishna Deb, patriarch of the Shobhabazar Raj, founded the family Puja and further used it to enhance his business interests. Thus began the tradition of business entertainment.

After his victory at Palashi (Plassey) in 1757, Clive wanted a grand thanksgiving service; but the only church in town had been razed to the ground by Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula the year before. Clive consulted his *munshi*. 'Offer your thanks at the Devi's feet at my Durga Puja,' the latter advised. 'But I am a Christian,' protested Clive. 'That can be managed,' smiled the wily 'Nubkissen'.

And so Clive came to Shobhabazar in the

Black Town. A golden sofa was placed for him in the open quadrangle. The Durga Puja at 36 Raja Nabakrishna Street is still referred to as the Company Puja. 'Nubkissen' set a pattern for the Puja which became a fashion and a status symbol among the parvenu merchants. The number of sahibs attending the family puja became an index of prestige. Religious scruples fell by the wayside. The nautch girls were mostly from Muslim *gharanas*; and while they danced, the English guests dined on beef and ham from Wilson's Hotel, washed down with wine.

In these colonial-style merchant mansions, the northern side of the quadrangle – sometimes covered but often open – was the *thakur dalan*, where religious and social activities took place. Even today, on an auspicious day in August, clay modellers arrive at these houses to mould the images as their ancestors have done for generations. Their work complete, the dressers take over. In the Pathuriaghata Mallik family, the ladies of the house themselves dye the sarrees and decorate them with *zari* (gold brocade). In other homes the *'nalakar* cuts intricate designs on *shola*, white cork or pith. Coloured foil is also used: it is known as *daker saj*, as the foil used for the decoration (*saj*) was at first imported through the *dak* or post.

On Shashthi, the sixth day of the moon, the clay image of Durga is brought to life by the recitation of *mantras*. Married women renew their vows to Shiva at the foot of a *bel* or wood-apple tree and fast for the welfare of their children. Come Mahasaptami, the seventh day, and hundreds of *nabapatrikas* or nine chosen plants, bound in the shape of a female form and embodying nine powers of the mother goddess, are carried to the river for ablution: an offshoot of a pre-Aryan agricultural ritual. The adoptive branch of the Deb family reverted to vegetable sacrifice on this day after the sacrificial goat escaped its tether and ran for protection to the head of the house, Raja Radhakanta Deb. Many Vaishnav homes have similar stories to tell.

Sweets are distributed on Mahashtami, the most propitious day of the Puja. The Deb household distributes king-sized laddus. In the Mallik family, *khaja* and *gaja* are prepared.

The *lagna* (set time) of the most auspicious Sandhi Puja approaches, at the moment of conjunction (*sandhi*) when Mahashtami gives way to Mahanabami and the joy of victory.



49.2 Work in progress at Kumartuli

Drums beat, cymbals clash and conch shells blow. The air is thick with incense, obscuring even the Devi's face.

Bijaya Dashami, the tenth and last day, brings the pang of parting. Durga is drummed a grand but tearful farewell with repeated requests to return next year. From the 'great houses', Durga is carried in procession to the river on the shoulders of liveried porters or the men of the family itself. The community pujas postpone the farewell as long as possible and give Durga a rousing send-off. Miniature pandals atop lorries, lit by portable generators and accompanied by floats – pageant follows pageant through the streets to the Strand. Some old families, like the Debs, release a *nilkantha* or roller bird, sacred to Shiva, towards Kailash to tell the god of his wife's imminent return to her husband's home.

At the river, the goddess and her children are rowed midstream between two boats lashed together; to cries of 'Jai Ma Durga', the boats separate and the Puja is over for the year. A second roller bird flies back to Shobhabazar to tell the family of the Devi's safe departure.

Ramdulal Dey's rags-to-riches story is well known. According to the dictates of the day, he

built a huge mansion on Beadon Street, four times the size of the existing red-brick structure, where Durga Puja is still celebrated by his descendants of the fifth generation. The special features of this puja are the triangular backdrop depicting the ten divine wisdoms, painted by artists from Krishnanagar, and a horse-headed lion denoting the peace-loving Vaishnav business community.

The Malliks of Pathuriaghata are a family of Subarnabaniks or gold merchants, originally from Satgaon in Hugli District. Baishnabdas Mallik worshipped the *Abhaya Murti* or Shiva-Durga. His home on Darpanarayan Thakur Street has been divided, but puja is celebrated with the old punctiliousness in the *thakur dalan*.

49.3 A traditional Durga image at Maddox Square



The thousand-strong clan scattered all over the city collect here for the occasion. After the immersion at Prasanna Thakur's Ghat, the menfolk gather at no 32 Darpanarayan Thakur Street, embrace each other in the traditional *kolakuli* style, and partake of *siddhi* as they did when their ships sailed the seven

Another prominent Subarnabanik family are the Dattas of Thanthania. Their patriarch Dwarakanath Datta was banian and financier to Jardine Skinner and Company. He was the sole agent for textiles from Manchester, traded in tea with J. Thomas and Company, and in the heyday of the jute industry, invented the double tangle baling machine. He also imported the fabric for the old red turbans of the Calcutta police.

Dwarakanath built his house a hundred and fifty years ago. The next step up the social ladder followed: the hosting of a Durga Puja. But Datta was a staunch Vaishnav, and as such hesitated to worship the warrior goddess. By way of a pacifist alternative, a domesticated Durga came to Thanthania sitting on her husband Shiva's lap, her children around her, the entire family borne on the stout back of Shiva's sacred bull. Barendra Deb Sharma, the fifth-generation family priest, says that the puja still conforms to the prescriptions in the Nandikeshwar Purana, and the offerings have not diminished even by a single grain of rice. Kartik Pal is the modeller of this unusual representation of Durga. He is also a noted set designer of old zamindars' houses for the film studios of Calcutta.

The Marh Babus of Jan Bazar in central Calcutta are the progeny of Rani Rasmani, one of the first Indian women entrepreneurs and real-estate magnates. She owned over a hundred bighas of land in Calcutta. But she is remembered not so much for her business brains as for her philanthropy, and as patroness and devotee of Shri Ramkrishna, priest at her Kali Temple at Dakshineswar.

Rasmani had four daughters. After their marriage, their families lived in different sections of the rambling barrack-like building occupying an entire block near Jan Bazar. Rasmani used to celebrate Durga Puja at her residence with traditional pomp, including all-night *jatras*, rather than by entertaining the *sahibs*, with whom she carried on a running feud. One year, a European gentleman complained about the noise at her Durga Puja. She

retaliated by bringing out an even noisier procession the next day along the street built by her late husband, resulting in a fifty-rupee fine. Thereupon she ordered the blockade of another arterial road, also built by her husband. Traffic to and from the river came to a standstill. The adamant Rasmani gave the government the option of buying the thoroughfare at her price. The fine was refunded, but a licensing system – still notionally in force – was introduced for all processions accompanied by music.

After Rasmani's death in 1861, the sons-in-law took to celebrating Durga Puja in their respective premises. Amalnath Das, fifth-generation descendant from the eldest daughter, worships his paternal forefathers' Durga brought from Sinthi. One branch of the family moved across the street about a century ago and began holding their own puja. Unlike the Dases, they sacrifice seven goats. The modeller comes from Chandannagar and the dresser from Bardhaman. The Choudhuri Babus' magnificent image wears a tall *shola* crown.

With the passing of the years, the fortunes of Calcutta's *buniadi* families have altered, usually for the worse. But the family puja has been kept up as a rule. 'Nubkissen's' cannon is silent, as is that of the Debs of Natun Bazar, but the glitter of the tiaras still worn by the ladies bespeaks the bounty of their ancestors. Purnendukrishna Deb, a descendant of Nabakrishna's only son, points to a pair of huge gilt-framed mirrors flanking the altar and identifies the portraits on the medallions as Lord and Lady Clive. The Mallik ladies, wearing enormous gold nose-rings threaded with precious beads and pearls, also evoke an old-time atmosphere. Their Durga, moulded by the famous Pals of Chandannagar, also wears a nose-ring.

Priyagopal Hazra, the seventy-four-year-old doyen of the Rasmani clan, sits in his dilapidated but palatial home in Jan Bazar. He cannot dream of 'developing' his very valuable property in central Calcutta. Demolishing Rani Rasmani's *thakur dalan* would mean the end of Durga Puja.

But the family spirit of Durga Puja has descended on the many households in the multi-storeyed buildings which are rapidly changing both the skyline and the life-style of the city. Many of these now hold their own Durga Puja, run by a committee of residents. Community lunch on the Puja days restores the spirit of the joint family without its problems,



while variety shows in the evening bring out the hidden talents of the residents. Yet the rituals are followed meticulously: the same priest, drummer and decorator usually appear year after year, in the tradition of the old pujas. And the deepest sanctity of Durga Puja is preserved at the Ramkrishna Mission, Bharat Sevashram Sangha and other monasteries and religious societies.

Calcutta is transformed during this unique festival. Religious fervour and merry-making mingle remarkably. Durga Puja has now become an integrated celebration absorbing all castes and creeds. The whole city takes a holiday. From the colonnaded *thakur dalans* of Shobhabazar, Natun Bazar and Thanthania, Durga Puja has moved outdoors: first to small club-houses and later, as community affairs, to temporary pandals.

An important puja, which still survives, was first organized by the Simla Byayam Samiti, a nationalist group at Simla (Shimulia) Street in 1926. Here in 1939, Subhashchandra Basu unveiled a 21-foot Durga created by Nitai Pal. Since then the pandals have proliferated and now number over two thousand.

Many of the family pujas are still supported by *debottar* foundations or religious trusts. With the advent of the Sarbajanin Puja, the onus of funding came to rest with the immediate community. The local toughs or *mastans*, as the self-appointed protectors of their areas, took the task of collection upon themselves. In their enthusiasm, they often turned militant in demanding subscriptions. This phenomenon was specially prevalent just after World War II. It



has not disappeared, but contributions are usually voluntary and feature as an item in the Puja budget of most homes.

Durga herself has kept up with changing times and fashions. She often bears a clear resemblance to some leading film star, and popular hits are played for her in the pandals. In the 1960s, the Devi often laid aside her clay form to be ingeniously recreated in sea shells, *shola* or pith, thermocole, matchsticks and nails. She and her family also broke out of the conventional *chalchitra* or single backdrop uniting the group. At Bagbazar one year, a diorama of icons floated in the clouds while Durga sat on Mount Kailas.

At Maddox Square, however, the goddess is still dressed in traditional *daker saj*. There are no short cuts in the rituals here, and many senior citizens have a personal relationship with this public puja.

The image is often a secondary feature of the Sarbajanin Puja, commanding a small part of the budget allocation. Instead, competitions sponsored by commercial houses encourage taller pandals and elaborate illuminations. Durga returns each year to a novel abode. The construction of the pandals is a skilful craft. Coloured cloth, pleated, stretched and frilled, rises over bamboo frames in the city's parks and streets. In the 1950s, the *hogla* or reed roof gave way to tarpaulin and galvanized iron sheets. In 1989, the theme for the pandals was places of worship – of all denominations. Durga sojourned in temples and mosques, gurdwaras and churches and Buddhist *stupas*. At Harish Mukherji Road, however, Durga comes every year to a permanent *pukka* building. On Tarachand Datta Street a decade ago, the residents of Rambagan Bustee created the celestial world of Omkar Dham in their hereditary craft of basketry work.

Calcutta's leading artists have taken it in turn to design the image of the Bakul Bagan Durgotsab. Among them are Nirad Majum-

dar, Rathin Maitra, Paritosh Sen, Shanu Lahiri and Meera Mukherji. Mostly, however, the *pratimas* are made in the 'celestial colony' at Kumartuli in the oldest part of Calcutta. Images are ordered in advance: there are only a few off-the-shelf sales. Today the clientele of Kumartuli extends to America, Europe and Africa, among the Indian communities living there. In 1989, images made out of *shola* pith by Amarnath Ghosh were flown to Sweden, Australia, Malaysia, and Nigeria: weighing only some three kilograms, they were ideal as air freight.

Kumartuli's own Durga Puja dates back to 1933. The image-maker was Gopeshwar Pal. Whereas private pujas still depend on family connections in Bardhaman and Chandannagar for dressing and decorating the images, Sarbajanin Pujas get theirs fully attired and armed from Kumartuli. Hence Kumartuli is also a beehive of ancillary crafts.

Power cuts, a lasting complaint through the rest of the year, are banished during Durga's short stay. Cascades of multi-coloured bulbs tumble from buildings. The trees bear festoons of lights. The walkways leading to the pandals are adorned with sparkling animated displays in coloured lights.

The transport and police authorities gear themselves with amazing success to cope with the colossal crowds as the whole city pours out into the streets and thousands of visitors arrive by plane, train and bus. Trams, buses and the Metro operate round the clock, and vendors of all sorts do a roaring business. The daily newspapers publish street maps showing the most important pandals, and identity badges are issued to children in case they are lost.

Durga Puja grows in pomp and festivity – though in Calcutta, no longer in number – every year. The display has inevitably burgeoned faster than the devotion. But all told, the heritage of Calcutta's Greatest Show has been honourably preserved.



THE FOOD AND SWEETS OF CALCUTTA



Pratap Kumar Roy

Calcutta, we cannot but admit, has no special cuisine to boast of. As the seat of the East India Company and capital of India for 140 years, the city became the natural leader of the nation in new life-styles and social practices; but in the supremely important sphere of food and cuisine, a mere 300 years may be too short a span for a tradition to grow in.

Yet needless to say, Calcutta has contributed much to culinary products and processes, though it could not create a complete cuisine. The city has attracted people from the neighbouring districts, from other parts of India, and from abroad. Imperceptibly, it has absorbed something of the food habits of each community. This could ideally have produced a chemical change where the various elements blended in a new cuisine all its own. This did not happen; but the contributions were accepted, often modified, sometimes refined, and came to be known as Calcutta food; sometimes it even became standard Bengali food.

Till the mid-nineteenth century, city life effected few changes in the old local food habits. There is remarkably little evidence of Portuguese, Dutch or French influence on Bengali food. *Lau chingri*, prawns cooked with marrow, is said to be of Portuguese origin. Unlike the Portuguese, we do not use coconut milk in this dish as we do in the more elegant prawn *malai curry*. *Malai* is commonly derived

from Malaya, where they have cooked the dish for centuries; but the philologist Sukumar Sen would derive it from *malai* meaning cream (here coconut milk) as in *malai baraf*, the India version of ice cream.

The speciality of Calcutta is its smoked hilsa. The hilsa fish does not appear in Bengali literature till late in the day. Sixteenth-century writings have elaborate descriptions of food – chiefly milk and sugar products and various fish, but not the hilsa. It is missing from Khullana's elaborate menu in Mukundaram's *Chandimangal* of the early seventeenth century. Bharatchandra mentions it in his catalogue of fishes in the *Annadamangal*, a century and a half later; but it occurs strangely seldom in nineteenth-century works.

The boneless smoked hilsa seems to be of European conception: robbing a hilsa of its daunting battery of bones is alien to Bengali practice and, one may say, Bengali sentiment. The dish is quintessentially Calcuttan, despite the rival claim staked by the Dhaka Club half a century ago. I do not know how the countless bones of the hilsa are made to disappear if not by magic. What remains, and lingers, is the taste and aroma.

Smoked hilsa is basically a 'club' dish, part of the Europeanized *baburchi khana*. Akin in a social if not culinary sense is the cuisine of the comparatively expensive western-style restaurants. Their continental food is sometimes





50.1 Kebabs on the kerb

good, but not on the whole of a class to write 'home' about. Calcutta's distinctive eating-houses are a little more down-market, a little more homely. Mughlai dishes acquire a local resonance in Sabir's *rezala* or the Royal's mutton 'chaap' and biryani. And a totally new, humbler but equally piquant range of dishes have evolved in the city's restaurants for the common man.

These restaurants grew to serve a special need of Calcutta life: the afternoon or early evening repast. The commuting office babu needed sustenance in the afternoon, the early morning *bhat-dal-machher-jhol* having been digested long ago. The need was met first by a packed 'tiffin' and, from the turn of the century, by the restaurants. Some of them run a skeleton service of eggs, toast and tea in the morning, but they come into their own only after 4 p.m. or so.

The leading establishments have dreamt up dishes of their own – often versions of the 'chop' or 'cutlet', which in Calcutta have recreated themselves in forms utterly unlike the English originals. Dilkhusa Cabin on Mahatma Gandhi Road; founded in 1900, is a major centre. Another is Chacha's 'Hotel' on Bidhan Sarani with its archaically-termed 'fowl cutlet'. Chacha's claim to be a hundred years old may be questioned, but not the taste of their product in the early years of this century: a subtle blend of fresh chicken and pure ghee, with a whisper of green chilli. It cost only four annas, but Chacha had a cruel marketing policy: he would sell only three at a time. I recall many an afternoon's despair at having failed to collect

two fellow-customers, though I had a four-anna bit in my hand.

Such restaurants flourished and multiplied. A major reason, no doubt, was that Hindu homes did not yet admit mutton and certainly not chicken. But because the favourite fish was available at home, there was less demand for new fish items. An honourable exception is the prawn cutlet, an invention of Allen's Restaurant on Arabinda Sarani. Another is the fish roll, introduced by the café 'opposite Jatin Das Park.

This brings me to two special Calcutta favourites. One is the paratha-roll, dispensed today all over the city from quick-service kiosks; but old-time connoisseurs remember its elevated conception and birth at Nizam's in Corporation Place in the 1930s. Nizam also offered an anda-paratha, close kin to the mughlai paratha, and once again sold today at every street-corner.

The other Calcutta curiosity is the Kaviraji cutlet, a mutton or chicken rissole fried in egg batter. I do not know how the name evolved: could a benign *kaviraj* or ayurvedic doctor have bestowed this elixir on man? Or is it (as some think) an Indianization of 'coverage', referring to the egg that cradles the rissole? The attar of the form was the 'fowl Kaviraji' of Anadi Cabin in the mid-thirties. (Old-time proprietors liked calling their eating-places 'cabins', just as mere restaurants often were and are 'hotels'.) Anadi might also have introduced the mughlai paratha about that time, though Dilkhusa Cabin claims precedence.

One of the charms of a big city is the variety of ethnic food restaurants; but in Calcutta, only the Chinese have made much headway. We have long been used to Cantonese food; Szechwan cuisine appeared only in the 1950s, when Ta Fa Soon opened its doors in Chinatown. Here again, the true connoisseur looks beyond the expensive restaurants to the nondescript eating-houses down narrow lanes in either the Chinatown at the city centre or that in Tangra – the latter recently opened up by the Eastern Bypass. Beyond that, there is little international ethnic food in Calcutta.

Of Indian food, Punjabi dishes have taken firm hold over Calcuttans. The pioneers were the Khalsa hotels of yesteryear selling a dish or two of chicken or mutton. Today it is fashionable to eat at *dhabas*, some of which have become rather refined establishments. South

Indian food served in small eating-houses has also caught on recently: Komala Vilas showed the way in the 1940s but attracted little attention.

The tragedy of Calcutta is that there is practically no restaurant serving Bengali food. Madira at Subodh Mallik Square made a gallant and delectable attempt many years ago; connoisseurs applauded but the business failed. The torch is now carried in humbler fashion by Suruchi on Elliott Road, constrained by fixed prices and the social objectives of the All-Bengal Women's Union that runs it. But at

least it keeps alive the names of some dishes that non-Bengalis would otherwise never have heard of.

Where Calcutta truly reigns supreme is in the kingdom of sweets. These serve for casual refreshment as well as dessert after meals. Here again only the professional shines: there is nothing comparable in Bengali home cuisine, and the very different traditions of elaborate home-made sweets have virtually disappeared in modern Calcutta.

Extensive descriptions of Bengali sweets are found in the sixteenth-century *Chaitanya Char-*

Calcutta and the Sandesh

Although the rasagolla has become the archetypal Bengali sweet, a durable cultural symbol like the South Indian dosa or Punjabi *sarson da sag*, it is in the sandesh with its unending range of flavours, shapes and textures that Bengali confectionery achieves its highest glory. To the uninitiated one sandesh is pretty much like another, little balls of curd or casein (*chhana*), which is the raw material for most kinds of Bengali sweets. But experts – the average Bengali is one – are capable of distinguishing almost endlessly among its varieties.

The primary sense of the Bengali word *sandesh* is 'news' or 'a message'. Some scholars derive the name of the sweet from the old practice of sending food, particularly sweets, with messengers. That the name has attached itself to a special kind of sweet, may be a sign of exceptional regard, a reflection of the purity simplicity of its preparation. Other sweets – made of coconut, flour, sesame seeds or semolina, fried or soaked in syrup – are equally part of Bengali social life. The sandesh, however, enjoys a distinct measure of social prestige.

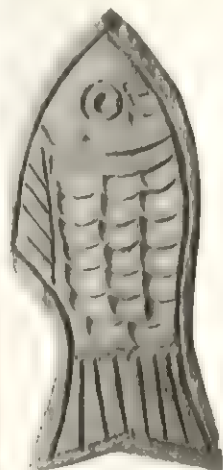
Various sweets are traditionally associated with various places in Bengal. Bardhaman boasts of its mihidana and sitabhog, Malda of its khaja, Dhaka of its amriti. But the great variety of sandesh may justly be claimed for Calcutta, as it was here, in the late eighteenth and

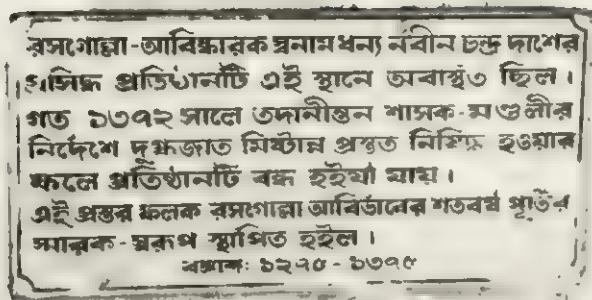
nineteenth centuries, that confectioners came to enjoy the patronage of a wealthy and pleasure-loving class. The traditions established at that time still continue to be observed.

Then as now, in all good sandesh, it is the quality and purity of the *chhana* that is of prime importance. Flavours and fragrances are prized for their subtlety and are expected only to accentuate the basic taste of the *chhana*. In the classic *golapi pera*, for example, the accompanying rose petal imparts a faint aroma to the sweet. A seasonal variety is the sandesh with *gur* or golden syrup – in this case made from date-palm juice – itself capable of many tastes.

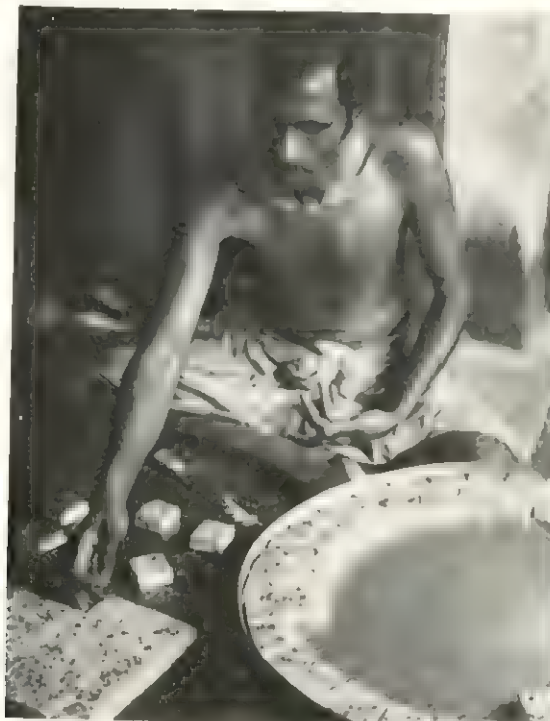
Over the decades, sweet-makers have exercised their imagination in naming their creations: *Manoranjan* (Heart's Delight), *Abak* (Wonder), *Nayantara* (The Star of the Eye), *Bagh* (Tiger), *Abar Khabo* (I'll Have Another), as well as untranslatable classic appellations like *Chandsai* and *Dedomanda*. The sandesh is one Calcutta institution that thrives as before. Adulteration and mass production have taken their toll, and diehard conservatives may sneer at modern additives like chocolate and synthetic flavours, but the confectioners of Calcutta, the inheritors of Eshelath Dey and Nabinchandra Das, continue to produce a fine range of sweets of the highest quality.

50.2 Old sandesh mould from Kalighat





Above :
50.3 Tablet
commemorating the site
of Nabinchandra Das's
original 'rasagolla' shop



Below :
50.4 Arranging
sandesh in Nakur
Nandi's shop

itamrita, in Mukundaram's work in the early seventeenth century and Bharatchandra's in the eighteenth. Milk and *khoa* (solid thickened milk) were the main ingredients then: *chhana* or soft curds were not much in use. Extensive use of *chhana* began just over a century ago: Mahendranath Datta, Swami Vivekananda's brother, writes at that time in his snippets of Calcutta that there was not much of sandesh, and the rasagolla had just arrived.

The use of *chhana* transformed Bengali confectionery. Master craftsmen produced endless varieties of sandesh, the regulated use of heat or

pak creating the taste special to each brand – all simple in theory but arduous to prepare. So too with the rasagolla – so simple to make, so difficult to make well.

The secrets of Calcutta's century-old confectioners are confined to a small area. Simla (Shimulia), where Girishchandra Dey and Nakurchand Nandi have existed from 1844, has a few other master-artists in the same street. Bhimchandra Nag, a couple of kilometres to the south, is at the outer edge of this charmed area. Nabinchandra Das, who introduced the sponge rasagolla in 1868, is two kilometres in the other direction.

However much we may rave over the *manohara* of Janai or the *kanchagolla* of Chandannagar, in the array of unmatched sweets Calcutta is without peer. It may, however, come as a revelation that Bhim Nag came to Calcutta from Chandannagar and Girish Dey from Janai.

No account of Calcutta food is complete without a eulogy of its sweet *dahi* or yoghurt (*mishti dai*). I have failed to trace its origins, and its preparation is a closely guarded secret. Only in Calcutta does *dahi* acquire that ethereal quality, that feel of silk and taste of something out of this world. Cross the river and the *dahi* is no longer the same.

Calcutta can also take pride in its *luchi* – a refined, sophisticated form of the *puri*. The *luchi* has been with us since the Middle Ages; but Charnock's city has bestowed perfection on its kind. For once, it is at its best not in eating-houses but in homes, where it floats on your plate like an autumn cloud, soft to the touch and light as air. It is hard to accept that the *puri* and the *luchi* are of the same ilk.

Instant dishes have robbed us of the pleasure of good food prepared as an art and savoured at leisure. In this as in other spheres, Calcutta seems to have worked out a compromise between the finer demands of the spirit and the imperatives of practical life. Its range of special food and sweets can captivate the gourmet even while they bring joy to the life of the common man.



THE CALCUTTA BOOK FAIR



Biswajit Matilal

The pulse of a city beats the loudest at its exhibitions and fairs, and Calcutta's claim to culture is perhaps best upheld by the book fairs it hosts every winter. Of them the Calcutta Book Fair, organized by the Publishers' and Booksellers' Guild, holds pride of place.

It would be simplistic to describe the Book Fair merely as a show. It is something more – 'larger than life', according to a publisher who participates regularly. The Fair is a time capsule of Calcutta's life and culture, the three-hundred-year-young city's tribute to itself.

The Publishers' and Booksellers' Guild inaugurated the Fair in 1975 by bringing together a number of big, medium and small publishers. Since then it has been an annual event, gaining in strength with every year. It now claims to be the largest book fair in Asia. More than 400 publishers joined the 1990 Fair, held on a 3,50,000-sq.-ft. area near the Victoria Memorial. Besides publishers from West Bengal and all over India, they included representatives from Britain, the USA, the Soviet Union, China, France, Bangladesh and other countries. Nine newspapers and periodicals, four universities and twelve government agencies took part.

How did it all begin? The Guild spokesmen journey back to the mid-1970s when there was a slump in sales and books had been reduced to inessential commodities. A good number of booksellers and publishers came together to

form the Guild and mounted their first exhibition on a modest scale. But then they felt the need for a 'grand exposure' of Calcuttans to books. Success was instant.

The 1975 Fair attracted some 1,12,000 visitors; in 1990 there were a million. The organizers ran out of tickets on the last day, finally opening the gates to allow free entry. While some 35,000 titles were displayed at the maiden Fair, within a decade the number rose to nearly 6,00,000. From a total transaction of Rs 15 lakh in 1975 the figure has now soared to crores.

The importance of the Fair is reflected in the publishing schedule of the city's important publishers. Earlier, new titles were released on the occasion of the Bengali New Year, Akshay Tritiya (another auspicious day in the Bengali almanac) or just before the Pujas. Today almost all leading publishers and a number of the smaller ones time their releases to coincide with the Fair. Titles brought out to commemorate the Fair always seem a big draw. Even reprints of old titles, not always revised, hit the stalls and capture many buyers.

To the ardent Calcuttan the Fair calls for a regular pilgrimage. 'The carefully designed stalls, the easy access to any number of Indian and foreign titles, the varied display of recent as well as rare books on any subject, the very smell of paper and ink draw me to the Fair every day while it lasts,' declared a Fair buff. The book industry, in its own interests, de-



clines to increase the standard discount of 10 per cent on prices; but that is no deterrent. A dictionary of technological terms or a foreign book on photography at even 10 per cent discount is a bargain any time. Local bibliophiles save through the year for their 'fairing'. Even so, alas, soaring prices often eat into their budget, and the purchase may have to be deferred by a year.

The Fair is not only a meeting-point for the city's intelligentsia, authors and publishers; it is also a general rendezvous where many old friendships are revived. The fair ground is watered at intervals to keep down the dust; garden umbrellas and occasional benches dot the scene, makeshift fountains are set up, and the songs of Rabindranath and Nazrul Islam played a few decibels above the hum of the crowd. The many eating-places provide welcome distractions. One or two publishers bring out a daily Fair Bulletin, and people pick them

up before forming queues to enter the stalls shortlisted there. Publishers of little magazines have a separate enclosure while budding portrait painters have their 'Montmartre'. A sketch costs only five rupees, and calligraphy is taught for an even smaller fee. Curiously for a city long under Marxist rule, the fair-goers seem to have a special love for religious books. The number of stalls selling them, often managed by religious organizations, swells every year.

In a general way, the demand for stalls outstrips the available space. At the end of the Fair, the best stalls of various categories are awarded prizes. The variety of stalls recalls a museum: replicas of a temple, a thatched mud hut, or the facade of a famous building. They may display fine filigree work in bamboo; or, at the modern end of the spectrum, sport glass doors, chandeliers and carpeted floors. As a tribute to the city's Tercentenary, the Fair gates in 1990 were replicas of popular ghats on the

51.1 *The fairground*





Ganga like Babu Ghat or Prasannakumar Thakur's Ghat. They reminded Calcuttans of their heritage, to which the Fair itself may be considered the latest addition.

Questions and criticisms may be raised: for instance, about there being no official daily Fair Bulletin. But a thick volume published during the 1990 Fair included some useful articles and a comprehensive list of Books in Print in West



Left .
51.2 & 51.3 Inside a
stall

Bengal. Some want the controlling authority to be more broad-based. There are rumblings of discontent from publishers denied space in a particular year. Despite all this, the Calcutta Book Fair is here to stay and grow.

Bengal is proverbially said to hold thirteen festivals in twelve months. The Book Fair is gaining prominence and may soon become a proverbial fourteenth.



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